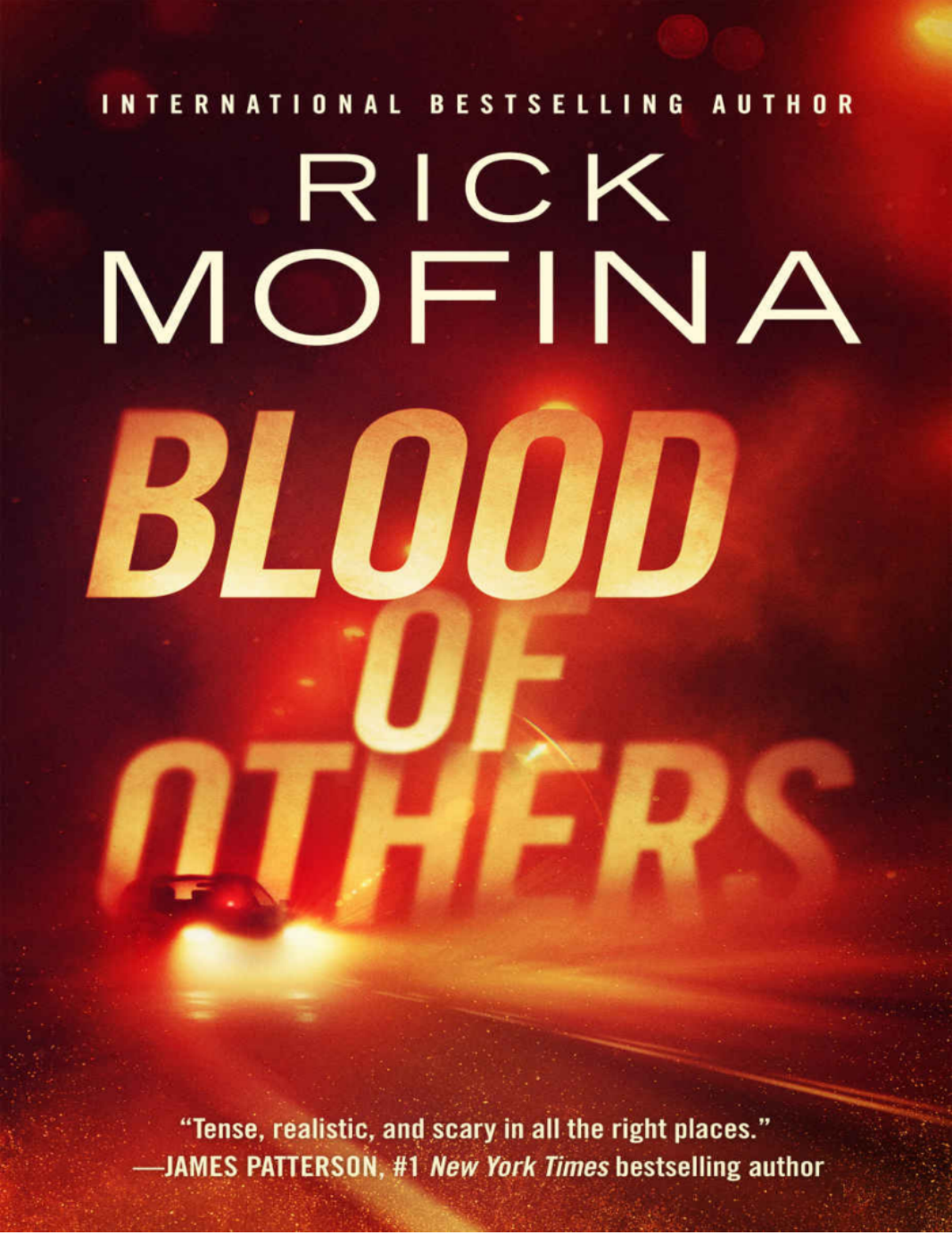

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RICK
MOFINA
BLOOD
OF
OTHERS
"Tense, realistic, and scary in all the right places."
—JAMES PATTERSON, #1 New York Times bestselling author

RICK MOFINA

BLOOD OF OTHERS



Blood of Others
Rick Mofina
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For my father

Pray for me; and what noise so ever yea hear,
come not unto me, for nothing can rescue me.

--*The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1604) by Christopher Marlowe

ONE

Iris Wood studied death every day of her life. Helping people confront it was what she did for a living. But tonight she was facing her own fears head-on. And she was losing.

Driving home after her first night course at San Francisco State University, Iris was adrift in the darkness. She rarely travelled this far south in the city. Her world was limited to the boundaries of her apartment in the Western Addition and her researcher's job in a downtown office building on Montgomery.

Her decision to attend an introductory astronomy class at SFSU was a brave new personal step. Not because she was interested in the stars, but because she needed to venture beyond her solitary universe, something made painfully clear to her weeks ago at the last office party where the resident busybody cornered her before she could escape.

"You never stay at our parties, Iris. You're so mousy in your cubicle, most of the time we don't even know you are here. Have some wine, dear."

"No, I really should be going. I have someone waiting at home."

"Like who? You live alone, don't you?"

"No. I don't. I'm living with somebody. My boyfriend."

"You have a boyfriend? Since when, Iris? You never told me." Miss Busybody grinned as she sipped her wine.

"Well, I --"

"What does he do?"

"Works at home. He's the quiet type."

"What's his name?"

"Jack."

"Jack? We'd love to meet him. You should --"

"Really, I have to go."

In the elevator Iris's face reddened, stinging with the realization of how pathetic she was. That night at home she fought her tears while working on her computer. Jack, the four-legged male in her life, plopped himself in her lap, purring and nudging at Iris to overcome her shyness and wade into the real world.

Now, here she was, lost in it. This was exactly what she had feared. She left the map she had made back in the lecture hall. Her attempt to navigate from memory was futile after a dozen blocks or so. She took the wrong exit from the campus, meandering on Lake Merced, Middlefield, Sloat, and Crestlake. How did this happen? The fog from the Pacific didn't help. This was silly. Getting back should be a no-brainer. If she could just get back on

Nineteenth Avenue, it would take her right to Golden Gate Park, and from there she knew she could find Fulton, then east to her apartment near Alamo Square, in time to curl up and watch *Sleepless in Seattle.*

Where are you Nineteenth Avenue?

Could ask somebody for directions but the streets seem deserted tonight. Besides, she didn't really want to approach anybody. She pressed the automatic lock button again before seeing a flashing emergency light in her rear-view mirror. It came out of the shadows. She pulled her car over and was bathed in pulsating red from the dash-mounted police light of the unmarked car that stopped behind her.

Iris had never encountered traffic police before.

"Evening, ma'am," said the man's voice from behind the intense flashlight beam.

"Did I do something wrong, Officer?" She squinted.

"Your license and registration, please."

Iris switched on her dome light, producing the items from her wallet. The officer put them on his small clipboard, then directed his flashlight on them.

"You drove through an intersection, missed the stop sign."

Stop sign? What stop sign?

"I guess I didn't see it. Sorry."

"Happens all the time. Where are you coming from tonight, ma'am?"

"A class at SFSU."

"You consume any alcohol tonight?"

The flashlight was directed at her face.

She squinted. "No. I don't drink."

"Drugs?"

"No."

"Would you please shut off your ignition and step out of the car."

"Why?"

"Roadside sobriety check, ma'am."

Iris saw a pale half-moon peeking through the clouds as she stood before the tall officer. His face was darkened by the night, distorted by the strobing red light of his patrol car. From what she could see amidst the fog, they were situated near a heavily treed park.

"Would you please count aloud backwards from one hundred while walking heel to toe in a straight line for me, ma'am?"

Iris accomplished it without difficulty.

"Thank you, ma'am. I am going to have to cite you for the stop sign. You can wait in your car, or in my cruiser. It won't take long, but I will require your signature after I run a check on your particulars."

The area was a little creepy so Iris opted to wait in the police car then get directions home. The officer opened the rear right passenger door.

She thought it odd how the car did not seem to have a police radio crackling or any other police equipment. In fact, it had that new-car smell and

a plastic recycle bag from a rental agency. The red emergency dash light was almost blinding. She still couldn't see the officer's face as he wrote up her ticket from behind the wheel.

"Ma'am, can I ask you a personal question?"

"I guess so."

"What exactly do you look for in a man?"

She had heard this question before. But where?

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Yes, you do. Tell me something, Iris. How's Jack?"

Iris Wood froze. "Excuse me?"

"Jack, the guy you're living with. Or should I say, cat."

She was dumbstruck. Paralyzed. *How could he possibly know…*

"I think I'll wait in my car."

"The back doors have child-safety locks. Won't open from inside."

Iris swallowed, meeting his eyes in the rear-view mirror.

"You know, Iris, people shouldn't lie to other people. It always catches up with them in the end."

Iris could not speak. Her blood was pounding in her ears. The stranger grunted, turning in his seat, gripping a device that looked like an electric razor, suddenly pressing it against her neck, instantly overwhelming her neuromuscular system, disorienting her until she collapsed.

He switched off the red light, then drove away, vanishing into the fog with Iris Wood in his back seat.

TWO

Julie Zegler was talking on her cell phone while disarming the security system at the rear of Forever & Ever, her bridal boutique near Union Square.

"You're sure it's finally done, Ronnie?"

"Completely. I stayed until nine last night to finish it."

Zegler could hear the bells of the cable cars on Powell Street clanging as the control keypad beeped an all-clear. She entered her shop, switched on the lights.

"You know, she's picking it up this morning. In two hours."

"I know."

Zegler went to the work room to get the completed gown.

"Any problems, Ron?"

"The bodice. Her recent augmentation complicated things. Of course, there was her attitude."

"What? Sorry, I can't seem to find --"

"Don't you remember? Her attitude. Rhymes with rich."

The store phone began ringing. *Please. We don't open for another hour.* Zegler rustled through the finished orders. Brannigan, a size-four chiffon mermaid. Dodd, trumpet skirt in a ten tall. Lorenzo, an organza affair, size seven.

No Carruthers.

"Ronnie it's not --"

"Remember, she invited me to lunch at her favorite French restaurant on Belden two months ago. Never once saying Christoban is in a Malibu detox center. In her phony baby-girl voice she says: 'Oh, Ronnie I just *have* to have you! I want the best Veronica Chan ever! Transform me….' "

Zegler bit her bottom lip and kept searching. Li, petite princess, size two. Shire, a size-eight readingcoat. Tannenbaum, five, a classic taffeta. Wong, a size four, a bouffant.

No Carruthers.

The phone stopped.

"…she goes, 'Ronnie, you're the artist. Create. I just insist on some teeny things.' *Teeny things?* She unfolds her three pages of hideous sketches of Christoban knockoffs."

"Ronnie, where did you put --"

"Nothing to do with my themes. Then the way she kept snapping her fingers at me: 'Oh Ronnie, make it magical, make it divine.' Julie, I feel sorry for her dot-commie millionaire beau. You can take the girl out of the trailer park but you can't --"

"Ronnie! It is not here!"

The phone started again.

"Julie. *It's there.* It's with the others."

"Well, I can't find it."

"I placed it with the others, Brannigan, Dodd. Did you look?"

"Yes! What time did you leave last night?"

"Nine. I told you."

"What about Clarice?"

"Left at eight. I was the last to leave. Look again."

"I am telling you it is not here!"

"I am telling you, *it is there!"*

Zegler rubbed her temple. The security system was properly activated. Nothing was amiss. The store phone continued ringing.

"Ronnie, I cannot find it."

"What do you want me to do, Julie?"

"Get your butt down here and find the goddamn gown, Veronica!"

"Excuse me?"

"It's a six-thousand-dollar order! We flew in the satin from Paris, the tiara's from Italy."

"Julie, I am on the Golden Gate Bridge, late for an appointment in Marin. I will be back in time."

Zegler snatched the ringing store phone, slamming down the receiver. An icy silence passed between the cell phones of the two women. Veronica Chan saw San Francisco's skyline in the rear-view mirror of her sapphire Mercedes 450 SL. She resented Zegler's tone. She was Zegler's partner, not her employee. It was Chan's artistry that attracted the top-end clients, not the cobwebbed reputation of a senile Bay Area seamstress.

Outside the shop a police siren sounded. Loud. Near. Very near.

"What's that?" Ronnie asked.

Someone began banging on the front door.

"I don't know, Ronnie. I have to get the door. Something's going on."

"You deal with this. I'll be there within two hours."

Making her way to the front, Zegler took calming breaths, inhaling the fragrance produced by the automated aroma machine. It simulated an English country garden, accenting the shop's elegant European motifs and plush carpet. Was she losing her mind? She was rude to Veronica. Perhaps it was time to consider retiring. She should have answered the store phone. It might have been Clarice. Maybe the order was picked up after closing. Or delivered. But Clarice was dependable, always leaving a clear note at the back. This was not good.

Hurrying by the ornate writing tables and chairs of the Victorian sitting area where brides planned and dreamed, then passing the archway to the change rooms, Zegler massaged her temples, glancing down the darkened corridor to the empty change cubicles, the floor.

She stopped dead.

Is that a shoe?

The front door was now being hammered.

An empty shoe?

Emergency lights were flashing through the four mannequins in the window display. The door thudded, cracked. A large uniformed police officer forced his way into the shop.

"Good Lord."

"Lady, are you all right?"

"Yes, what is this? I --"

His gun was drawn. He grabbed Zegler's shoulder pulling her to the street, instantly assessing her, then the shop.

"Are you alone in the store?"

"Yes, but I don't understand."

He spoke into his crackling portable radio calmly, saying, "We got a staff member in front. Kick the back entrance." A female officer was in the patrol car parked in front, talking softly, comforting two people in the backseat, an old man, his arm protectively around an old woman. She was sobbing.

Zegler heard more sirens, glimpsed an ambulance approaching. The noise, confusion, chaos.

"Ma'am, please stand by my car. Please, so my partner can see you."

"Yes, but, Officer, what's wrong?"

A small crowd gathering. A bike courier muttering "Jee-zus! That's real!" The officer ordering rubberneckers back.

"Everyone back!" The officer's face taut. "Over there, ma'am, stand by my car." His hand on his gun as he stepped into the shop. "Do not talk to anyone, please, ma'am."

Zegler hearing the old man pleading with the female officer over the old woman's sobs.

"We were just walking. Can't they cover it, or take us away? Please. We were just…"

Cover what?

Zegler turning to her storefront, discovering *five* brides on display, not the usual four. The strobe of police lights staining the gowns. Confused, her mind shocked, gasping, thinking it was a joke, her eyes not believing the Carruthers order, a slipper satin ball gown, floor-length chapel, Venice lace, open sweetheart neckline, illusion veil, the tiara, the entire front saturated in crimson, ruby, scarlet and deep purplish Burgundy against the shiny fabric.

A bouquet of white silk roses affixed to her hands, the bride was standing, shoulders secured to the steel rods of two heavy metal bases, head bowed, her bare feet in the pool of dark, blackish red, widening on the hardwood floor of the display case.

Dear God! That's not a mannequin! It's a woman! She's --

Zegler covering her mouth.

The droplets splashing like red tears.

Oh, dear God!

Sirens screaming. The tolling bells. Cable cars laden with office workers. The graceful lettering of the boutique's sign over the blood-soaked bride promising to...MAKE IT A DAY YOU WILL REMEMBER FOREVER & EVER.

THREE

As usual Olivia Grant's commute began by opening a paperback on her lap after finding a seat for the ride down Market to her job near Union Square.

But today she couldn't concentrate on her book.

Olivia was drawn to the young mother and father across the aisle. Early thirties. Happy baby strapped snugly to Dad's chest. The parents looked exhausted but their faces radiated absolute joy. The bond with their baby. *Pure love.*

It overwhelmed Olivia, awakening anxieties that had been stirring inside her for months. Years. She would never have what the woman across the aisle from her had. Olivia was alone. Utterly alone.

Her eyes glistened, blinking at the truth as she tried to return to the sanctuary of fiction. It was futile.

Time to face reality, girl.

You ache to have someone in your life but do nothing about it, clinging to the schoolgirl hope someone perfect is just going to walk into your world and rescue you. How many years have you been dreaming that dream?

Soon she would turn thirty-five. Thirty-six was next. Forty was looming. Birthdays were blurring by, accelerating her trip to middle-aged spinsterhood. Not the life she had envisioned. In high school Olivia had fantasized about how sweet it would be with her husband, her beautiful children, and their perfect home.

But boys seldom approached Olivia. She was painfully shy. Terrified of rejection. She had had few dates. In college it was the same story. She had expected to find her future mate there, but it didn't work out that way. Olivia had rarely dated in college. She had supported herself working part-time at Caselli's Gift Shop downtown, never once thinking some fifteen years would pass and she would still be there.

What a sad life. Stop it, Olivia. You're just a little bothered about nearing thirty-five and still being single. Nothing wrong with that. No big deal. Everyone finds their own path. Besides, there is always tomorrow and there is always hope.

Sounded like one of the greeting cards at the store, Olivia rebuked herself, caressing her tiny gold heart. She had bought it for her thirty-second birthday, a comfort gift to soften the letdown of her last date.

He was a lawyer who came to the shop occasionally. One day he asked her out. It was nice. He brought her a white carnation, they had dinner, walked along Marina Green. But Olivia had been nervous. So self-conscious she barely spoke. When it ended, he thanked her, then kissed her cheek. She never

heard from him again. She placed the carnation in the pages of a hardcover romance novel she kept on a shelf in her bedroom. Some nights she would look at it and touch its dried, dead petals, then the cheek he had kissed.

That was three years ago.

Olivia got off at Union Square and walked her workday route. It would take her by the bridal boutique and its enchanting storefront brides displaying the prettiest gowns. Surely that would revive her belief that dreams can come true. That maybe, *just maybe,* she would find somebody to love and live happily, Forever & Ever….

The yelp of a siren was the first indication something was wrong. She saw the revolving red lights, police cars, TV news crews, a huge tarpaulin covering the display window. Emergency radios chattering, police directing downtown workers to walk around the scene.

One man shouted: "Yo, Officer, I hear somebody got herself killed in there. Whatsup, man?"

"Move it along, please. Move it along."

Killed? Olivia cast a worried look in the direction of the shop. *A woman dead in Forever & Ever?* A firm hand touched her shoulder. "Miss, please keep moving."

Olivia hurried to Caselli's. The tiny gift shop was shoehorned between a grand café and large boutique on Maiden Lane.

Her keys jingled as she unlocked the front door. The transom bells rang loudly as she went to the back, switched off the alarm, put her lunch in the small refrigerator, hung up her jacket, and went through her morning opening routine.

She prepared the cash register, checked the credit and debit card machines, phone messages, mail, the fax machine, the computer, and the store's Web site for e-mailed orders.

Before he died, Mr. Caselli set up an automated on-line service to provide quick delivery of small gifts, flowers, and cards for busy downtown customers at risk of forgetting important occasions. Caselli's Internet service and the walk-in lunch-hour traffic kept the gift shop afloat. The store had a vast selection of greeting cards -- announcements, birthday, graduation, showers, wedding, anniversary, get-well, forgiveness, sympathy, congratulations, all the big days, Valentine's, Mother's, Father's, and many others.

Over the years Olivia had helped customers mark milestones in their lives. It was funny that in the region many regarded as the world capital of cyberspace, many people still gave traditional greeting cards.

The lunchtime rush was winding down when the doorbells jingled and an older heavyset woman, white hair in a high, tight bun, toddled in. Seventy-one-year-old Mrs. Caselli. As always, she was there to relieve Olivia for

lunch.

"How is it today?" Even though she had come to America as a young girl, Mrs. Caselli had not lost her accent entirely.

Olivia checked the day's list on the store's computer. "Busy. Thirty-two orders dispatched."

Mrs. Caselli placed a hand against her face, stared into the street. "Isn't it just horrible about the bride store? The TV news is saying a woman was murdered."

"Yes. It's awful. The customers were talking about it."

"Such a horrible thing in my beautiful city. I'm going to pray."

"Don't worry."

"You're not frightened, Olivia? It's so close."

"I guess. I don't know. A lot of other things frighten me. I'd like to know more about her, about what happened."

"Maybe you should close early today. Make me feel a little better. One hour earlier, please?"

"Sure. But don't worry." Olivia patted Mrs. Caselli's hand, then finished on the computer and got ready.

The older woman smiled, noticing Olivia's outfit. A cream-colored gabardine straight skirt with slash pockets, a navy knit print top with elaborate designs and a scoop neck.

"Nice clothes. Are they new?"

"A weekend sale at JC Penney." Olivia grabbed her lunch and jacket from the back room. "See you in an hour."

Olivia headed to Union Square, missing how the old woman used to optimistically ask if she was "meeting somebody" for lunch. But Mrs. Caselli's motherly concern about her marital status had faded when Mr. Caselli died. Unlike his wife, the old guy had been blunt. His big eyes had crinkled at the corners when he talked to Olivia about her not having any boyfriends.

"Life is too short to be eating by yourself from a paper bag with only the birds for company. A pretty girl like you should jump into life. Don't be so shy all the time. Don't be afraid of heartbreak or two. Olivia, that is how you know you are alive. Better to have loved and lost…" A smile rose under his thick white moustache. Two days later he had a massive coronary.

Mr. Caselli was right. She was not participating in life. She was observing it from a safe distance where nothing could hurt her.

So why was she in pain?

How many times at the end of the day had she spotted women cradling flowers, or toting a Caselli's bag containing a card *she* had selected, a gift *she* had suggested, and wrapped. She pictured those women, hurrying home to their children, their husbands, boyfriends, or life partners, for dinner, a movie, or to simply talk.

Every day Olivia helped strangers find the right gesture for important

moments in their lives but could do nothing to help herself. She had devoured countless books and articles about not needing a man to define herself, nor a career, about her biological clock; had studied advice on overcoming dating paralysis, the twin curses of shyness and low self-esteem. She had gone to a dating service but backed out.

She got a makeover once. The beautician, a gay man, had looked over her five-foot four-inch, one-hundred-twenty pound frame, then her face, and whistled. *"Look at you. High cheek bones, natural tones, classic features. Hazel eyes. A hetero heartbreaker, sweetie. Just keep that hair out of your eyes and smile more."* At home Olivia had stared at herself. *Who is that?* She had scowled, then scrubbed off the makeup, returned her shoulder-length auburn hair to her side part. She could hide there. It was safe.

Olivia sat on a bench in Union Square, chewing her egg-salad sandwich, gazing into her novel, then at the Corinthian column that had survived the 1906 earthquake. Long ago she had come to Caselli's a painfully shy and lonely college girl. A lifetime later, here she was, an older, lonelier woman.

Was this it? Was this all there was to her life? What was the point?

A cool breeze brushed Olivia's face turning her thoughts to the bridal shop and the dead woman. *Murdered.* Wasn't it strange how that woman had died where she had come to plan the rest of her life?

FOUR

"Dad?"

Tom Reed was not awake.

"Dad?"

A small hand nudged Reed.

"Dad?"

"I'm sleeping, Zach."

Reed groaned into his pillow, head hurting, throat parched. After work last night at the *San Francisco Star,* he had joined the usual gang for a few. Stayed late because he was off today and now his ten-year-old boy was shaking him.

"Son, get your mother. Please."

"Mom went to Los Angeles early this morning, remember?"

Los Angeles? A vague memory of Ann in bed telling him something about an unexpected early meeting with suppliers as he had wrestled out of his clothes in the dark. Then she had smelled the beer, rolling to him, voice like ice. *"Tom, you promised to stop this."*

He had been snoring about then.

Well, at least he was off today. Pulling his sheets tighter, enjoying the whole bed, hearing Zach wretch in another room, then return.

"Dad, I don't feel good. I puked."

Reed thought of the mess he'd have to clean.

"Where?"

"Toilet. Maybe I better see the doctor."

"Come here." Grunting, Reed sat up, slipped on his glasses. Zach's eyes were bleary, he was pale, his skin was blotched with red patches. He was feverish. *Those red patches.* Reed had never seen anything like that on Zach. Not good. "I'll call the doctor. Go get yourself dressed, brush your teeth."

Who was Zach's doctor? Shaw? Crenner?

Think about that later. He held his own head. How many beers did he have? The pain. Reed got himself to the bathroom, swallowed several headache pills, took a hot shower, and revisited his problem.

Brader. The *Star's* new metro editor.

They had first encountered each other as fiercely competitive young reporters at the Associated Press in San Francisco. Reed had broken a story about Russian mobsters, had been shortlisted for a Pulitzer, then accepted a job at the *San Francisco Star* as a crime reporter. It had angered Brader, who openly exaggerated his contribution to Reed's mob story. The lanky ambitious Texan soon got a job on the cop beat at the *Chronicle* where he began

ascending the management ladder. Several months ago, to Reed's horror, Zeke Canter, his beloved editor, left the *Star* for *USA Today.* He was replaced by Brader, who was now in a position to bury Reed.

The day after Brader arrived to start his new job at the *Star,* he summoned Reed into his office, leaned back in his chair, and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Reed, your file has been shit for the longest damn time."

It was true he hadn't hit many out of the ballpark recently. "It's a bit of a slump."

"I don't think so."

Brader was three years older than Reed, a few inches taller. Married. Two daughters. Thick wavy salt-and-pepper hair, perfectly groomed. Wore expensive button-down shirts and silk ties. Liked to wink, show his white teeth, do a lot of shoulder touching whenever he talked to female staff.

"You're stale, Reed. I saw that when I was at the Chronicle. *You need a change."*

"I like the crime beat."

"Lifestyles wants to expand coverage of whatever the hell it is they do. Here," Brader looked at the section of that day's edition, 'Choosing the right name for your pet'. What do you think?"

"This a joke?"

"No joke."

"I'm not interested."

"Get interested."

"Why?"

"Unless you show me something in the next few weeks, you're going to Lifestyles."

"What is this?"

"This damn newsroom needs recharging."

"All these years and you can't let it go. You still got a problem with me, that it?"

Leaning forward, Brader stared hard at Reed.

"I have a problem with your damn ego."

"My *ego?"*

Reed made a point of surveying the wall behind Brader. Covered with full-page reproductions of Brader's major stories, awards, and photographs of Brader with celebrities.

"Tom, I know you. I've looked damned hard at your stuff in the past year or so and frankly, you are overrated."

"Is that what you thought at your old rag when I was killing you?"

Brader ignored him.

"These are the facts, Reed. You are not a relentless investigative reporter. *You're a mediocre reporter with the luck of a jackass. No room for a jackass on a Brader news team, sorry."*

"Clyde."

Brader's face tensed. Reed knew he hated his first name. "I'm not a threat to you and you know it."

"Three weeks, Reed. If you don't dig up a real damned story by then, you're going to Lifestyles. Got it? Now get out."

Reed was determined to prove Brader wrong, but his weeks of pumping cops and street contacts were futile, leaving him to seek sanctuary in war stories at bars with other reporters from the paper. Coming home drunk or late had become his routine. *Again.*

After the Keller nightmare, Reed had vowed to Ann that he would never return to his *bad ways.* This morning she let him know that he had and she issued a warning. *"Better THINK about what you're doing, Tom. You made promises to us."* That was how she ended the note she left him on his mirror about her trip and Zach's schedule.

He threw on jeans, a T-shirt and a plaid L.L. Bean he left un-tucked and unbuttoned.

Maybe he should quit and finish his book. Ann's children's clothing stores were doing well. They could make it without his salary. But he couldn't focus on his book and he would never surrender to Brader.

Reed searched the kitchen for Zach's doctor's number, ashamed he didn't even know her name, or the name of Zach's teacher. He would have to call the school.

"Zach." He rifled through cupboards and drawers. "Where does Mom keep Doctor Cranson's number?"

"It's *Crenshaw,* Dad." Zach was dressed and produced a small black notebook from a drawer Reed had searched. Zach's face was still patched. He had combed his hair neatly. Smiled up at his dad. Zach loved being with him. Reed punched the number. "Thanks, son." The line rang. "Is your teacher in this book? I better call your school."

"Good morning. Pacific Sun Medical."

"No school today, Dad."

"No school?"

"Hello, Pacific Sun?"

"Sorry. I'm calling for Dr. Cranson?"

"Who?"

"*Crenshaw,* Dad!"

"Sorry, Dr. Crenshaw. For Zachary Reed. He's ten. A patient. I'd like to bring him in."

Reed heard computer keys clicking. His head was throbbing.

"Dr. Crenshaw is booked solid today. In the hospital tomorrow. Next week --"

Ann would kill him if he didn't get Zach to his doctor.

"That's no good. We need to see the doctor."

"What's the problem?"

"Zach's face is covered with red blotches, he's vomited a few times."

"We're really booked, Mr. Reed. Maybe if you kept him in bed?"

"What's your name?"

"Denise, but --"

"Thanks, Denise. We're on our way."

"Mr. Reed, I told you, we have no --"

"He's sick, Denise."

Annoyed, she sighed. "We might have an opening if you can get here in less than an hour."

Thirty minutes later, Denise was warm to Zach when she led him to an examining room, but cold to Reed when she entered information into the office computer. The waiting room was crammed with mothers who were scowling at Reed as he flipped impatiently through dozens of old *Time, Newsweek,* and children's magazines, worrying about Zach. On the drive, his face had improved and he said he felt better. What could it be? And why were these women so disgusted at him? Reed's head ached from the previous night, lack of coffee. His stomach was yowling from skipping breakfast. He hadn't shaved.

"Mr. Reed? The doctor will see you now," Denise pointed her pen to Zach's room, where he sat on an examining table, little sneakers dangling to the floor.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi, pal." The patches had vanished. He looked great.

"Mr. Reed. I'm Ellen Crenshaw." A woman in her mid-thirties, frizzy red hair, beige V-neck top and tan slacks. She was holding a file folder. "Zach's fine now, but I suspect --"

Reed's cell phone rang. In a reflex he took the call.

"This is Brader. Where are you?"

Reed's stomach tightened. "On my day off."

"Not by my schedule. You're on today and you're late!"

"No, I am not on."

"I want you to get your damn ass to Union Square. The Forever & Ever bridal shop. Photo's already got somebody there."

"I am off today, Clyde."

The doctor's mouth opened. "Mr. Reed, please."

Reed's head was shattering. His stomach roiling. He held up his hand, a plea for patience. Zach looked at his shoes.

"You are on duty today, Reed."

"My boy is sick! I am at the doctor's office and it's my day off!"

Crenshaw shut the door. Zach swayed on his feet.

"You damn well listen to me, Reed. Get yourself down there now, or get a new job. Forever & Ever. A homicide. Got it?"

Homicide?

Reed hung up. "I'm sorry, Dr. Crenshaw."

She began reading from the file.

Reed's phone rang again.

"Mr. Reed, please shut your phone off!"

He'd already taken the call.

"It's me," his wife said. "I tried you at home, where are you?"

"Hi. We had to go out on an errand, pick up something."

Crenshaw looked at her watch.

"Ann, my battery's going we could get cut off --"

"Put Zach on."

"Sure."

He passed the phone.

"It's Mom."

"Hi, Mom. I'm good. What did we have to go out for?"

Reed carefully mouthed the word *milk.* Crenshaw stared at him like he were insane.

"Milk. For my cereal. Guess the milk we had turned sour. Oh. The phone's beeping, Mom. Here's Dad. I love you!"

Reed took the phone. He was getting another call. "Ann? Yeah, it's the battery or something. When are you coming back?"

"Could be tonight. Tomorrow at the latest. We had plenty of fresh milk, Tom. Bye."

Reed took the incoming call.

"Hey Reed. It's Kayle. I'm down at this bride shop murder. When do you plan to get here?"

"Soon Kayle, I --"

The cell phone was pulled from Reed's hand as Crenshaw took it hostage in hers, closed it to write on a pad.

"Zachary's had a reaction to something. It could be an allergy due to diet or environment. I want him to see a specialist. Here's my referral to set up an appointment. Have Ann call me. You guys can go."

Crenshaw tore her written page from her pad, thrust it in Reed's hand with his phone, then vanished.

Reed looked at the note, then at Zach, as he folded the page and tucked it into his breast pocket.

"How do you feel now, son?"

"Fine, Dad."

"I was thinking we could make today a sort of job-shadow day. How's that sound?"

"Cool."

They picked up breakfast at a McDonalds drive-thru, ate on the ride to Union Square as Reed navigated the quickest route from the Sunset.

Zach's eyes widened at the scene downtown, a tangle of police cars, news crews, and lights. Reed flashed his press ID to a cop who nodded approval for him to park near his squad car.

"You stay with me. You do what I say. If you feel sick, let me know."

Zach nodded. Excited.

"Dad, is that Sky Parker from KTO?"

"Yes." Reed sipped coffee as they walked to the news trucks near Forever & Ever, where a pack had gathered. Cameras and groggy-looking press types sipping takeout coffee bordered the yellow crime-scene tape, joking quietly with officers, teasing them about lifting the tarp blocking the shop's display window.

"Five seconds. We won't tell. Please."

A blond-haired woman in her mid-twenties wearing a navy suit and impeccable make-up approached Reed.

"Tom. It's been a long time," Sky Parker had a honey-dripping broadcaster's voice and huge violet eyes. "Who's your little friend?"

"Zach, my son."

Parker's brow knitted with concern. "Tom, I don't think this is --"

"Long story, Sky. Long, painful story. What's up here?"

Parker dropped her voice, practically whispering in Reed's ear.

"What we've got is an old couple stop to admire the brides on display this morning, noticing that one is covered in blood. Dead bride in the window." Parker smelled like fresh flowers.

"Anyone talk to the couple?"

"Nope. Too shook-up."

"Staff?"

Parker shook her head and sipped coffee, leaving a lipstick imprint on the lid.

"Suspects?"

"Nothing. What we hear is they haven't touched the bride yet. This is a fresh story, guy. Early in the day, good for my deadline. My desk will feed on this every fifteen minutes. Hey, Zach."

"Hi."

"No school today?"

"No."

"Bet your Mom doesn't know you're down here with Dad?" Her pretty eyebrows bounced.

Zach shook his head.

"Who's here from homicide, Sky?"

"Haven't seen anyone yet." Parker's cell phone rang.

"Hey, Reed!" Levi Kayle, a tanned *Star* news photographer with a goatee, spotted him, then Zach. "Reed, what's with your partner? We got

child labor laws in this state."

"Funny."

Kayle showed Reed his digital photos on his Nikon. A detective peeking behind the tarp. Stark. "Not great, but it will work," Kayle said. "Are you the only writer on this?"

"Don't know. Nobody's told me anything," Reed said, feeling his shirt being tugged.

"Dad, I gotta go to the bathroom."

"Not now, Zach."

"Dad. I have to."

"Tom, there's a coffee shop around the corner," Kayle said.

Inside the shop while Reed waited for his son near the washroom he spotted an elderly couple sitting alone. The woman was distraught, the man was comforting her. A waitress brought a glass of water.

"This might help," the waitress said.

"What happened over there?" Reed asked.

"A dizzy spell. Something to do with that commotion at the boutique. Must be a big deal, there's a cop in our office on the phone."

Reed approached the elderly couple.

"Everything all right, sir?"

"No, everything's not all right," the man said. "It was horrible."

Reed approached their table.

"Sir, can you tell me what happened?"

"We already told you. Are you another police officer?"

"No. I'm not." Reed glanced over his shoulder, then at the woman, staring into her water glass. "I'm with the *Star,* I --"

Gazing at the window, the man said: "Every morning we walk by that shop. My wife likes to look at the dresses. We couldn't believe it. At first we thought it was a terrible joke. A sick prank. A movie set maybe. I've never seen so much blood in my life. Everywhere. The way she was posed, the way it cascaded, from her face, her chest. Such horror."

Water spilled from the woman's trembling cup after she sipped from it.

"I'll never walk by the shop again," she said. "Never. As long as I live."

Reed finished scribbling his notes thinking these were powerful quotes, raising his head to see his son standing next to him staring at the couple.

FIVE

Walt Sydowski watched his girlfriend Louise kissing another man on an empty beach and swelled with pride.

"Because you don't know what tomorrow will bring."

Ain't that the truth, Sydowski agreed, watching the TV commercial for estate planning end with Louise and her "husband" strolling hand-in-hand into a setting sun. She looked so good up there on the set over the counter of Nick's. The busy diner smelled of frying bacon. It made the best Denvers and BLTs in town and was a short walk from the Hall of Justice.

Sydowski sipped the last of his coffee waiting for Louise to return from the rest room. He felt the flare of heartburn, popped a Tums knowing he'd pay the price for not holding the onions from his omelet. Or was he reacting to what Louise had dropped on him while eating her muffin? They met here for breakfast before his shift and her early appointment downtown with advertising people.

Louise was a vibrant sixty-two-year-old grandmother and part-time actor who could pass for forty. They had been dating for close to a year now since meeting at the Seattle bird show. What she saw in a widowed old battleship like him was a great mystery. Sydowski nodded to the TV when she returned to their booth.

"Saw you with that other guy again."

"Oh, he's not as cute as you, Walter." Her green eyes taking in his wavy white hair, tanned complexion, the rugged smile which glinted because of his two gold crowns.

Being with Louise felt so good. At the same time he felt guilty. It was more than six years since his wife Basha had died. Over three since Louise lost her husband, the judge. Living alone in her big place in San Jose. Her daughter was in Sacramento, her son in Pittsburgh. Sydowski's two girls lived in the East.

"So, Walt, what do you think of my idea?"

"About you moving in with me?"

"Our lives are here. We're right for each other."

"I am trying to get my old man to move in with me."

"John loves it at the villas in Pacifica and he doesn't want to leave. What is it really, Walt?"

He didn't know. Maybe he was afraid of a life change, of betraying Basha's memory. Was he nuts?

"Cripes is that Reggie? Reggie Pope?"

Louise followed his attention to the street and a man rummaging through

a trash can.

"We were partners once. Give me a minute."

Sydowski hurried outside.

It *was* Reggie Pope. Unshaven, reeking of booze, hair matted, clothes dirty, tattered, probing a trash can with a stick.

"Reggie? It's Walt."

How many years had it been since Sydowski last saw him? Since Reggie had been shot? Reggie had been in Narcotics, pursuing a dealer in a crack house when he fell through a broken step, dropped his weapon, trapped. Reggie's partner, Ben somebody, had frozen, allowing the dealer to shoot Reggie in the spine. The last Sydowski heard, the partner had been reassigned to some computer-desk job somewhere and was pretending to still be a cop. But Reggie had faded away. Seeing him like this now, Sydowski was at a loss. The stick came out of the trash. It was a cane. Leaning on it, Reggie seemed to take a long time turning to face Sydowski. Eyes avoiding his.

"Christ, Reggie, what happened?"

"Hello, Walt." Reggie said. "It hasn't been good. Not good. I took a bad turn. The POA tried to help but I got addicted to the pain pills. Took it all out on Fran. She left me. Gets most of the pension. That's how it is."

"Reg, we didn't know. Man, I'm sorry."

"I got a room in the Loin. It's clean. I get by."

"Want to come in for some breakfast? Coffee? On me. Come on, we'll talk and --"

Reggie noticed Louise. "You got better things to do. I have to go. Walt, you promise me you won't tell the guys."

"Reg, they'll want to know."

"You promise me, Walt. You do that."

"If you take this." Sydowski gave him four twenties from his wallet.

Reggie took them and limped down the street with Sydowski standing there watching him disappear.

"You going to be okay, Walt?" Louise said.

"Yeah. I forgot to pay our check."

"I took care of it. Just when you left, the waitress said your lieutenant is trying to reach you."

"Leo? But I got my new cell phone --"

An older unmarked Caprice Classic screeched to a halt, double-parked in front of Nick's. Dash cherry revolving.

Inspector Linda Turgeon got out. Ponytail bouncing, the jacket of her powder-blue pantsuit flapping, revealing her shoulder holstered gun as she rushed to Sydowski.

"Got him, Leo," Turgeon said into the phone pressed to her ear while reaching into Sydowski's shirt pocket for his bifocals, snapping them open, slipping them on his head. "Leo. I *have* showed him how to use his new one." Turgeon reached into Sydowski's jacket pocket, fished out his slim cell

phone. “We’re on our way, Leo.” She snapped her phone shut, held Sydowski’s before his face, tapping her glossed fingernail on a small green button.

“This is the *on* button Walt. Press it when you’re *on* duty.”

Sydowski studied his new phone through his glasses. “Thought I had it on.”

“Get in. We caught one at Union Square.”

“Call me later.” Louise raised her voice.

The car doors slammed and its tires squealed. Sydowski returned Louise’s wave as the Chevy disappeared in traffic.

“Your honey back there is a fine-looking woman.” Turgeon took Seventh, grabbed the car’s radio mike to tell the district units they were coming. “Too good for you.” She sipped coffee from her takeout cup, glancing at Sydowski. “What’s with you?”

Sydowski folded his glasses into his shirt pocket as they moved down Market, buildings, city blocks rolling by. He reflected. Over twenty years in the detail. What was he at now, four hundred homicides? The highest clearance rate in the state. *“You can retire any time, Walt,” his Lieutenant Leo Gonzales would remind him, unlit cigar clamped in his teeth. “Take care of your old man, your birds. Go fishing in British Columbia. Beautiful up there. You don’t need this job any more, Walt.”*

But he did. Being a homicide detective was how he defined himself. He thought of Louise. His old man, his girls. Reggie Pope popping up like a ghost. Sydowski rubbed his face. “It’s a long story, Linda. What do we have at the Square?”

“Body in a wedding gown, displayed in a bridal boutique.”

“A wedding gown.” Sydowski crunched on another Tums. “This day just keeps getting better.”

At the shop Sydowski and Turgeon pulled on white surgical gloves, slipped on shoe covers, and began a case log in their notebooks. The patrol officer briefed them while raising the yellow police tape protecting the scene.

“Who made the find?” Sydowski said.

“Retired jeweler and his wife on an early morning walk. We got them waiting at a coffee shop.”

“After you, Walt.” Linda indicated the door. “You’re the primary.”

For a moment after they had entered, Sydowski and Turgeon stood in respectful silence, taking inventory of the shop, the floors, walls, merchandise. The horror in the display window. Sydowski grunted, stepping up and into the display, careful to keep clear of the blood pool, notebook poised as he positioned himself in front of the body to study it.

Barefoot in blood. Blood browned on the front of the elegant wedding dress. Hands clasping flowers, bouquet of white sweetheart roses. Female,

white, late twenties, early thirties. What had she been doing in the hours before her death? Average build. He estimated her at five-four, one hundred twenty. Body secured at the shoulders with belt-like strips of white fabric to the rods of two heavy steel bases. Front upper abdomen saturated in blood. Reddish brown. Damp, dripping in spots. Dried in others. Dozens of incisions pierced the gown in the heart area. Stabbing? Frenzied attack?

Sydowski swallowed.

Her head was bowed. Tiara atop her dark brown hair. He lifted the veil to a pulpy mask of bloodied tissue, white teeth bared in a macabre grin, terrified eyes, frozen open. Wide. Locking on to his.

He looked into them.

A wedding gown. Brown eyes. His daughters had brown eyes. *Dancing with them at their weddings. With his wife. Dancing with his girls. Their glorious white gowns. Their smiles. Brown eyes glistening. Laughter. Love.* Blood. The odor wasn't too bad. She couldn't have been dead long. Did she know death was upon her? Did she feel it? Did she scream? What was her final thought?

"Walt." Turgeon stood beside him.

Sydowski could not take his eyes from the victim's, as if searching them for help, a clue, anything.

"Walt?"

"Her face is gone, Linda. Peeled from her skull."

SIX

By midafternoon Sydowski and Turgeon were still at Forever & Ever. During that time, techs from Crime Scene and Photo arrived. Voices subdued, they searched, collected, and retrieved evidence while recording the event. Apart from the din from the street and the ringing of the store's phone, which went unanswered, they worked in near silence.

Silver graphite fingerprint powder was everywhere, patched on doors, windows, change rooms, the coffee room, sink, washroom, toilet, walls, telephone, cash register, computer, office equipment, light switches as if muddied school children rampaged through the shop.

Then the forensic pathologist from the medical examiner's office arrived -- Julius Seaver, a tall thin man with red hair cropped short to his skull. Dressed in a dark suit, city star and name tag fastened to his breast. Seaver never smiled but had a reputation for exceptional on-scene work. Sydowski briefed him and he went to work. Seaver was relieved someone had the foresight to cover the scene from public view. At the outset of his preliminary investigation, Seaver advised Sydowski that they should look for a knife, scissors, scalpel, or bladed instrument as the weapon.

But nothing of significance had been found, except the lone shoe. It belonged to no one associated with the store. It was a left, a woman's casual polyester oxford. Cotton lining, rubber-sole. Size six. Consistent with the victim. It showed little wear. Unlaced. It was located outside the third change room, its position measured, photographed, videotaped. Bagged. The lab would scour it for trace. The thinking was it belonged to the victim.

Who was this woman? Why her? Why here? Why this gown? The most expensive order? Because it fit? Why that dress? The Carruthers order? Turgeon had reached Maggie Carruthers. She was alive. Very.

"Yes, it's tragic, Inspector, but what about me? You tell Veronica she better get me another gown, or I am going to sue."

Earlier Lieutenant Gonzales sent down more people to canvas the area. He was in court all day, stepping out to call for updates on the case, which one Bay Area radio station was calling "Who Killed the Bride?"

Sydowski and Turgeon searched the store several times. Basement, main floor, office, work area, storage rooms, attic, roof. They'd requested a search of dumpsters and trash cans within a few blocks for a weapon, the victim's clothing. Anything that might have been tossed.

Access to the rear alley was sealed. A traffic cop had moved Turgeon's Caprice there and Sydowski sat in it, alone, reviewing his notes. At this stage, they had nothing. No wallet, no identification, no weapon, no clothing, no

signs of a struggle, no missing cash or merchandise. Nothing.

Clarice Hay, the night manager, had left at eight. Veronica Chan had completed the gown at nine, activated the security system, and left. Julie Zegler had been alerted to the body by the first officer who was flagged by the retired jeweler and his wife.

Chan swore to Sydowski she had activated the security system. Zegler confirmed that she had to disarm it. No forced entry. But no outside sharing of the key code. How did he get in? The security cameras were on a recorded loop. But they had recorded nothing. It was strange. *Nothing.*

How does he get her in a gown that was here and displayed without signs of a struggle. How did he do it? Drugs? Persuasion? A sex game or dare, a fantasy rider? At the threat of a weapon? He has control. He's out of control. Brazen. She knows him? Jealousy? Envy? Revenge. Wound tracks around the heart? Someone's heart was broken. The face? God, her face. Maybe he's scarred. Maybe he thought she was two-faced? Or it's rage for a lie? Maybe she jilted him. Humiliated him? Left him at the altar? This is payback? So he manipulates her corpse, poses her for the world to know, then takes her face.

Barney Tighe tapped on Sydowski's window after helping canvas neighboring businesses. "Nothing yet, Walt. Went through some security camera recordings for the front and rear. Nothing. Woke up a few night watchmen from the office buildings. Nothing again."

"We're going to pull district patrol logs, talk to the guys on duty last night, and hit the private firms, you know the drill."

"So how bad is it?"

"Bad."

"You thinkin' he brought her here, or done her here?"

"Not thinking anything right now. Seaver's going to give me a heads-up from the coroner's crew before they finish and move her." Sydowski checked his watch. "Should be any time now."

Tighe nodded.

"Hey, Barn, you remember Reggie?"

"Reggie Pope? Sure. Where's he at now?"

"Downtown somewhere. Whatever happened to his partner?"

"That mope? Ben Wyatt?"

"Yeah. Now I remember him. What happened with him?"

"He got a rough ride. Took stress leave, then bounced between districts. Taraval, Ingleside. Why?"

"I saw Reggie the other day. It got me thinking."

"How's he doin?"

"Don't know. We didn't talk much."

Turgeon emerged from the shop. "Seaver's done."

Turgeon and Sydowski met him in the back of the boutique, amid the brushstrokes of the fingerprint investigator.

"We'll get her prints and an odontologist, to help with identification,"

Seaver sighed, going to his notes. “None of this is confirmed, Inspectors. But I’d put time of death within last six to eight hours.”

“Cause?”

“Likely multiple stab wounds. Easily forty, almost all to the heart. All deep. This is overkill. A frenzied attack.”

“Sexually assaulted?”

“Appears not.”

“Location.”

“It appears she died here. In the window.”

Turgeon was puzzled. “But how did he get her in the dress without a sign of a struggle, no blood tracks?”

“I’m speculating but it looks like the killer or killers planned it. Very organized. Ritualistic. Like it has some meaning,” Seaver said.

Sydowski made notes. “What about her face?”

“It appears he took it with him.”

Turgeon shook her head. “Jesus.”

“But why?” Sydowski said as his cell phone rang. It was his lieutenant.

“Walt, anything more?”

“Just a bad feeling that’s getting worse.”

“The merchants want the street opened up.”

“Bless them for caring.”

“What’s the read on it so far?”

“He brings her here, gets her in a gown that was here, then does her. Stabbing. Displays her.”

“Got a name yet?”

“Working on it.”

“What’s next?”

“We’re going to head back to the Hall soon. Interview the staff, see if they remember anything unusual. Go through client and staff lists. Check with records. See if anybody lights up. Any histories, court-orders, threats, assaults. It’s a start, until we get a name. Or a break.”

“Walt, I want to put a small team on this. It’s your file, but I’ve got a green light to pull in some investigators from General Works. To help with anything. I’ve set a case status meeting for tomorrow morning.”

“Fine. I’ve got a lot of other areas to cover.”

“What’s your gut tell you, Walt?”

“That I should have held the onions on my omelet this morning, Leo.” Sydowski munched on a Tums, studying the white gowns, remembering his wife, their daughters’ weddings and happy times.

“Tell me, Walt.”

Sydowski saw the coroner’s deputies carefully placing the victim into a body bag.

“I don’t think this is a one-time deal, Leo.”

SEVEN

Reed's mother-in-law lived in Berkeley, in a two-story house with a wrap-around porch. Good thing she was home to take Zach. After calling her, Reed figured he had time to leave the scene and return. He had no choice. He couldn't keep Zach with him on this story.

"Ann could be back tonight. We'll call."

"It's not a problem, Tom."

Reed thanked her and headed back to the Bay Bridge, reflecting on this murder. Victim in a wedding gown posed in a display window. He had no name on her. No success reaching the owner, or any staff. The *Star*'s fashion writers were supposed to call with contacts. Reed didn't know who in homicide had caught this case. Some of the old humps in the detail hated him and would shut him out. With others he had a mutual respect, forged from battles they had endured together.

Reed's phone rang while he was leaving the bridge.

"It's Brader. Where are you?"

"On the job."

"Tell me what you've got. I'm heading into the first story meeting."

"A Jane Doe, murdered. Found in a wedding gown in the display of a bridal shop."

"That's it? TV's got that. Who is she?"

"Don't know."

"Why was she displayed like that?"

"I don't know."

"Motive? Any suspects, yet?"

"I think it's a little early."

"A good reporter would know this stuff, Reed. You've got to do better. Show me something, big shot."

Reed tossed his phone onto the passenger seat of his car and cursed at San Francisco's skyline.

After returning to Forever & Ever, he learned nothing new. He buttonholed a grizzled tight-lipped homicide veteran, who was canvassing the area.

"No, it's not my case, Reed. Sydowski's the lead on this. Just went back to the detail."

Reed left the scene for the Hall of Justice on Bryant.

In the polished stone lobby, waiting to pass through the metal detector, he spotted a uniformed female officer heading to the elevator with two civilian women. The older one was dabbing her eyes with a tissue. Reed overheard parts of their conversation.

"…they better cover it, Julie, it was a six-thousand-dollar gown."

"I don't know if our insurance covers it."

The doors opened. They stepped into the car.

"Is that all you can think about right now, Veronica? That poor woman. This is monstrous."

The elevator doors closed.

Julie. Veronica. Reed went to the water fountain. Those women *had* to be from the bridal shop. A fashion editor had called Reed at the scene, telling him Forever & Ever was an exclusive boutique owned by Julie Zegler and Veronica Chan. His elevator stopped at the fourth floor. He had to catch them here before they left, but if he was going to get a jump on this story, he really needed Sydowski.

The doors opened and there he was, calling to Turgeon down the hall, "Give me a minute. I'm just grabbing a sandwich from downstairs." Then Sydowski stepped into Reed's elevator and grimaced.

"Just when my day was going so well."

"Hello, Walt."

The doors closed. They were alone

"Go away, Reed. Please."

"Come on, it could be like old times."

"Whenever you get on my case, bad things happen."

"I heard it was brutal."

Sydowski turned to Reed, assessing him. Mid-thirties, about six feet, a firm build that had softened a bit since the last time he saw him; disheveled short brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses, bloodshot blue eyes.

"You look like crap, Reed. Stressed out like maybe things aren't going so good. You need a break and you want me to help you?"

"Sort of like that."

"Exactly like that." Sydowski shook his head. "I've got nothing on my mind but your concern."

"Forget it, Walt."

"Listen. Trouble with you is you get so much wrong and it gets printed in your paper because you fail to heed my advice."

"I don't get it wrong. Facts change on the way to the truth."

"That's clever."

"It eats you up when I get close. Admit it, Walt."

"You get too close and you know what I'm talking about. You damned near cost us one case in particular. And it damned near cost you everything."

Reed swallowed hard. Sydowski was right about that. Sometimes he wondered if Ann could truly forgive him for the hell he'd put Zach through

because he had pursued a story so hard, it turned on him and swallowed his family.

The elevator stopped, they stepped out. Sydowski tapped his forefinger on Reed's chest.

"Here's my advice. Shave before you go out in public. It makes a better impression. Now, go away."

"That's the son of a barber talking."

They entered the cafeteria, grabbing the last of the packaged sandwiches. Sydowski took chicken salad on whole wheat, leaving Reed ham and cheese on white. Then Sydowski selected an orange, which informed Reed that his old friend had few leads on the case. When Sydowski was confident about a case, he ate pie. When he had nothing, he peeled oranges. It helped him think.

"You've got nothing on this, right, Walt?" Reed bit into his sandwich on the way back to the elevator. "Nothing."

Sydowski arrived at the doors and a decision.

"If I tell you one thing, will you leave me alone right now?"

Reed nodded. Chewing.

"Stay with this one, Tom. It's a bad one."

"How bad? I mean you got to give me more."

Reed's cell phone rang just as the doors opened. Turgeon rushed out clutching a sheet of paper, not even seeing Reed who had turned his back and stepped away to take the call.

"Walt, we've got to go, traffic located an abandoned Ford Focus near Stern Grove. Seems good for our victim."

Reed lost what Turgeon was saying as his caller bleated into his ear. Turgeon was telling Sydowski something about a parking sticker, a woman not reporting to work, living alone in the Western Addition.

"I called," Turgeon said. "Just got her machine."

Shoulder pressing his cell phone to his ear, Reed struggled to jot details of what Turgeon was telling Sydowski; then Brader shouted on the phone.

"Reed! I said have you got anything new?"

Reed disconnected the call.

EIGHT

In keeping with Mrs. Caselli's wish, Olivia closed the gift shop an hour early, then found herself near Union Square at the bridal shop. Alone on the sidewalk, sirens echoing in the city around her, standing transfixed in front of Forever & Ever.

In the aftermath, the crowds and TV crews were finishing "live-from-the-scene reports" and packing up. A couple of patrol cars were guarding the storefront. The officers keeping a vigil chatted quietly at the yellow police tape; the tarpaulin still enshrouded the display window, like a bandage covering a wound. Olivia had come with a single white rose. She reached down, placing it near the door of the bridal shop.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Do you know anything about this case?" The officer was in his mid-forties. Nice smile. Polite.

"No. Nothing."

"You work around here?"

"Caselli's Gift Shop on Maiden. I pass by here every day and, well, this is such a pretty boutique."

"I see."

"Officer, do you know who she is, or why somebody would --"

He was shaking his head. "Sorry, they don't tell us anything." The crackle of his portable police radio interrupted. "Ma'am, maybe you should just go home."

Olivia did not go home. She took a Powell Street cable car, its bell tolling as it climbed into Nob Hill. Olivia continued on through Russian Hill, bound for Ghirardelli Square where she walked along the waterfront amid the cry of gulls and the smells of Fisherman's Wharf, alone among the tourists, stopping to take in San Francisco Bay and the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge, bathed in the light of the setting sun.

She was hungry and found a restaurant with a small line. Olivia had come here before and enjoyed it. It would do, she thought.

"Is someone joining you?" the hostess asked through her professional smile.

"No. I'm alone."

Olivia followed the hostess to her table, not hearing her remarks on the way, asking her to repeat them.

"I was saying, quality time alone is a nice thing, when you can get it," the hostess said.

Olivia's table was in a quiet darkened corner from where she could see other diners, couples, laughing, sharing stories, toasting.

She picked at her meal, a chicken pasta entrée, studying the flickering flame of her candle as it liquefied the wax. Over the soft music, restaurant conversations and clink of cutlery, her waiter was pouring her wine, mentioning something about a fine Napa white. She didn't hear him, peering through her glass at her struggling candle.

At one point she began a letter, but aborted the idea. Who would care? She was so tired. Tired of hoping. Tired of wishing for something that was never going to happen.

It was time to pay the bill

"Could you get a taxi for me out front, please?" she asked her waiter after signing her credit card slip, then changing her mind. "I'll pay with cash."

She had come to a decision.

Her driver had a toothpick sticking from his mouth and a book of T.S. Eliot's poems opened on the seat beside him.

"Where to, miss?"

"Golden Gate Bridge." Olivia got into the cab.

Curls of snow-white hair peeked from the driver's leather cap. He looked eastern European, late fifties, with kind eyes that found hers in the rear-view mirror. They drove much of the way in silence, Olivia gazing into the twilight.

"Your first time in San Francisco?"

"I live here."

He nodded. "A glorious evening. Make you feel like an after-dinner walk by yourself on the bridge, miss?"

Curious, how he put it. Olivia pulled herself from the scenery rolling by her window to meet his concern in the mirror. "Something like that."

After paying the fare at the bridge, Olivia began walking, choosing the sidewalk on the east side, traffic humming by in both directions.

By the time the taxi driver had reached the Palace of Fine Arts, worry forced him to turn his cab around and return to the Golden Gate. He had a bad feeling about the woman he had dropped off at the bridge. He had to act on it. Hoping he wasn't too late, he pulled up at the first clear lane, tires screeching to a stop at a booth, the toll taker frowning from the window.

"I want to alert you to a fare, a woman I dropped off here about fifteen minutes ago. She looked very despondent for sure. Walked off alone on the east side."

The driver described Olivia.

Picking up his phone to reach a public safety patrolman, the toll taker said, "Patrol shift ends about now." He raised his voice to the driver over the traffic. "But I thought I just saw the scooter start its last patrol."

A cool wind kicked up from the bay as Olivia passed the South Tower, asking herself if this was the only answer.

Yes.

San Francisco's skyline glittered like a distant dream that did not include her. Below, the black waters of the bay beckoned her to escape the prison of a lonely heart, enticing her to unshackle herself now. For she would never be free from the pain. It would only get worse.

Would it? How could she be sure?

Hadn't she tried everything to overcome it, to conquer her low self-esteem, her fear of rejection, her shyness? Yes. And hadn't she failed? Oh, how she admired, envied, the single women who did not need a partner, who had friends, children, careers, social networks, lives to share, something connecting them.

They mattered.

She mattered to no one.

No friends. No family. No one, except a sick aunt in Chicago, who had come to her mother's funeral years ago. Olivia had sat with her alone in the funeral home chapel near her mother's oak casket for over an hour. They were strangers and hardly spoke.

Olivia had reached the middle of the bridge.

How had she come to this?

Was it because her birthday was near? Was it the young couple with their baby on the bus enjoying a life she ached for? Was it the bridal shop murder, turning even her fairy-tale dreams to dust? Was it the reality of a dead flower pressed in a romance novel next to her bed in an empty house no one visited, where she adjusted paintings no one saw, arranged furniture no one sat in, cooked meals that were eaten in solitude to the ticking of a grandfather clock?

Am I living in vain?

Then is this the answer? Had she tried everything?

Her hands gripped the cold metal railing.

She was uncertain, feeling the bridge's vibrations in her hands. It was two hundred and forty feet to the water. The drop took four seconds. Four seconds and it was over.

Do you want to end the pain, or end it all?

In her heart she knew she had so much to give, so much to share, if she could only find the right person.

There had to be someone for her out there. There just had to be somebody.

She lifted her head, breathing deeply. The night sky was so beautiful. *Tell me what to do,* she pleaded with the stars, hands fixed to the railing. *Please tell me what I should do.*

Her answer came in her memory of Mr. Caselli's advice to her before he

died.

"You should jump into life. Don't be so shy all the time. Don't be afraid of a heartbreak or two, Olivia. That is how you know you are alive."

Don't be afraid.

At that moment, it was as if his gentle hand took hers as a breeze lifted her hair from her eyes.

This is not the answer, Olivia. Don't be afraid. Take a chance.

It was time for her to take control. She *did* have a life and it was worth living. Olivia relaxed her grip on the railing.

"Everything okay, miss?"

Olivia didn't notice the scooter, nor its lights as she met the friendly face of a large public safety patrolman, standing next to her.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?"

Olivia was no longer alone.

She looked to the stars, the lights of San Francisco, feeling her ice-cold isolation melting in the warmth of a human connection.

"Thank you. Yes. I think I'd like to get a taxi to take me home."

The patrolman was expert at reading people who came alone to the Golden Gate Bridge. He had witnessed some tragic events at this very spot.

"I think you've made a good decision."

Olivia's driver was the same one who had dropped her off. During the trip home, he shared a joke his four-year-old grandson told him repeatedly on Sunday visits. "Know what the doctor said to the sick banana? Are you 'peeling' okay?" It made Olivia laugh, blink back her tears. Upon arriving at her house, he opened the taxi door for her.

"Thank you."

"You take care of yourself, miss."

He drove off and Olivia entered her home, shutting the door, sliding against it to the floor, pulling her knees tight to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, and holding on.

She sat that way, listening to the grandfather clock and thinking. Thinking how close she had come on the bridge to succumbing, to giving in to something so dark. So final. Something she vowed never ever to consider again. Tightening her hands into fists, she pounded her knees softly.

Never again. That was stupid, Olivia. Dangerously stupid. Get a hold of yourself.

Olivia was at a crossroads. The time had come to stop wallowing in self-pity, to get over this adolescent shyness crap, to put Mr. Caselli's advice into action and get busy living. Talk to people. She *would* take control and she would start now. *Right now.* Olivia stepped outside of the house, something she never did at this hour, and stood before it, as if seeing it for the first time.

It was a pretty three-story wood-frame Edwardian home, situated on a hidden serpentine lane between the Upper Market and Twin Peaks. Its mature trees stood like sentinels offering privacy on a neatly landscaped lot bordered

by ornate wrought-iron fencing. Her father, an accountant who had died in a car accident when she was a teen, had purchased it decades ago. Her mother left it to her, and with her meager salary from Caselli's, Olivia managed to pay for its taxes, insurance, and upkeep.

Reaffirming her love for her home, her sanctuary, she picked a few roses from the front garden. Every day she arranged flowers for other people, now it was time to do it for herself. She carried them into the house, walking along the glistening hardwood floors, opening the sliding glass parlor doors leading to her living room with its crown moldings, its fireplace, then passed through the formal dining room with its elegant chandelier, to the kitchen, opening a cherry-wood cabinet for a vase. She filled it halfway with warm water, then placed the flowers inside, inhaling their wonderful fragrance before climbing the staircase.

Now that she had the perspective of age, it was clear to Olivia that her parents had chosen to live restrained lives. They had bequeathed her their legacy but with some regret. For she never forgot her mother's final words before the cancer finally took her.

"Do not let strangers live in our home, Olivia. Keep it. Fill it with life. Fill it with love."

Olivia took each step, determined now more than ever to honor her mother's dying wish, for it was her wish too. She drew a hot bath, lit a scented candle, soaked and wept as if purging her soul of a festering poison. *You are going to be all right. You will have many tomorrows, each one a new chance.*

After wrapping herself in her robe, Olivia was not ready for sleep, or another romance novel, or a movie. But she was restless and her attention went to a women's magazine she'd left on the seat of the master bedroom's bay window. It contained a long article about a shy couple who got married after meeting on the Internet. He was from New York, she was from Portland. They had agreed to meet in Chicago. They dated, then got married, now she was pregnant. Olivia had read it a couple of weeks ago.

Her interest rekindled, she made some raspberry tea and reread the story, remembering how it had inspired her to check out a few sites, casual chat groups for singles.

That was a few weeks ago. Now Olivia went to her computer. She had initially just monitored some groups before joining a few. She never revealed much of herself. A small generic bio. No one seemed interested. She had forgotten about it.

But that was then.

Olivia's keyboard clicked. She bypassed Caselli's Web site, which was her homepage. She didn't mind doing some work at home for Mrs. Caselli during the busy periods. Now it was all coming back to her. Olivia thought maybe the chat sites would teach her how to play the field, how to talk to guys from a safe distance, a place to prepare herself to pursue dating. *Let's see.* She had been very careful not to offer her real name or specific personal details.

Playing on Olivia, she chose *liv* and came up with the name *livinsf,* for Liv in San Francisco. She felt comfortable with that. Her computer whirred and one of the sites popped up on her monitor. A few keystrokes and she found her introductory bio.

Thirty-something. SWF. Retail manager. Hopelessly shy, a good listener. livinsf.

Olivia's slot showed she had a few new responses, unread since the last time she visited this site. Nothing special, a few welcomes, a few descriptions of bad dates, boyfriends who were jerks, men complaining about women. Olivia went to another site, where someone -- a woman -- took the time to advise livinsf not to be shy. To get out and meet real people. Another site member chimed in with lists on how to meet men. One member actually had wondered where livinsf had gone.

After a long, thoughtful walk, I'm back, Olivia typed, then reached for her teacup. It needed refilling, so she went to the kitchen. By the time she returned, she had received a new response.

What exactly do you look for in a man?

NINE

Ominous rock music hammered in the hallway of the inner-city apartment building. Garbage was strewn on the floor, obscene graffiti violated the punctured walls, screaming along the scar-like crack that led to the shouting coming from unit 832, where San Francisco Police Inspector Ben Wyatt had business. He was about fifteen yards away when the door burst open, ejecting a woman in her twenties, torn dress, bloodied face, sobbing, running to him.

"He's going to kill me! Please help me! He's going to kill me!"

A large male appeared at the darkened doorway. "Come back here!" Stained sleeveless T-shirt, rope-like veins in muscular tattooed arms, one rising, outstretched hand holding a handgun aimed at the woman.

Wyatt had no time. "Police officer! Put your weapon down!" The man, his face contorting into a malevolent mask, yelling: "Woman, you are going to die!" Wyatt's eardrums throbbing, music, shouting, stress, he sidestepped, crouched, feeling the smooth trigger, training his .40-caliber Beretta on the suspect. "Police. Drop it!" The man refused.

Wyatt squeezing one, two, three, times. The suspect went down. In four point two seconds, Wyatt had saved one life and taken another. He lowered his gun. Exhaled. Each time he killed a suspect now, his pulse rate peaked a little lower than it used to. He had lost track of the number of dead now.

"You made the proper decision, Ben." Sergeant Elmer Gruzzio, a firearms instructor at the SFPD Academy, checked the cable attached to Wyatt's Beretta, the C02 tank, and the line connecting it to the air pack attached to Wyatt's belt. Gruzzio replayed the "deadly domestic" scenario on the full screen, both men studying the three dots in a tight cluster grouping over the suspect's left upper chest. All three dots were green. "All mortal," Gruzzio said. "Want to go again?"

One night a month for over a year, Wyatt had arrived at Diamond Heights Park after regular classes ended to take a private session on F.A.T.S., the SFPD's Firearms Training System. It is a computerized laser shooting simulator, a high-tech tool used to sharpen the stressful mental process any cop can face in a heartbeat. It confronts them with realistic "shoot, don't shoot" scenarios allowing a split second to make a life or death decision.

Then you drop into hell, Wyatt thought. *Where's the scenario for that?*

Since Wyatt's ex-partner Reggie Pope had gotten shot, Gruzzio was the only officer in the entire SFPD who exchanged complete sentences with Wyatt. A few months after it happened, the police psychologist had confidentially urged the department's hierarchy to return Wyatt to street duty and discourage his shunning from all ranks.

There was more than one officer wounded in the tragic shooting of Inspector Pope, the psychologist wrote in his most recent status review. *Inspector Wyatt continues to pay an extraordinary personal price for unfortunate circumstances beyond his control. It appears to me that contrary to force-wide perception, he did not "choke at a critical moment." He had no option. He did nothing wrong and remains an extremely capable officer who should be returned to street duty and standing among his peers.*

After Pope's shooting, Wyatt was bounced around, then detailed to Crime Scenes, tasked to investigate computer and Internet crimes. Since then he had become skilled at computer work but he wanted to get back into investigations, to return to the street, to go toe-to-toe with his demon. So he took intense firearms sessions at the academy where he came to know Gruzzio, insisting he throw the most demanding scenarios at him, pursuits, gun-jammings, school yards. Wyatt consistently scored high, making the proper decision in every case. Like this morning.

"Got time for another?" Gruzzio said.

"I'll pass, Elmer. I'm pretty bushed."

Gruzzio began disconnecting the air pack from Wyatt's belt. He had grown to like Wyatt, who seemed like a conscientious, intelligent cop. But after months of watching him, Gruzzio could no longer keep silent about his concern over Wyatt's situation and the increasingly aggressive, desperate way he worked through each session. "What's the latest word on when you'll be detailed back to the street?"

Wyatt slipped on his sports jacket. "They keep telling me 'soon'. You hear anything?"

"Not a word." Gruzzio knew it was rough on him. "Ben, I've watched you here, working on this contraption for over a year. Want some advice?"

"Go ahead."

"You probably have the highest score average than any officer I've run through here. I know it's been a while since the shooting. But no matter how many times you get it right here, it will never erase what happened. You can't go back, I don't have your shooter in here. This machine does not offer a forgiveness scenario. That one comes from you."

Wyatt looked at Gruzzio. "It's that obvious?"

"From day one. Ben, you've got to let it go."

Wyatt did not know if he could.

Gripping his car's steering wheel as he drove to his apartment, he knew what was coming. It tormented him after every session, pulling him back to that terrible day when he and Reggie had worked plainclothes in Narcotics, following a lead on a new drug family.

Their suspect standing six on a downtown corner, a woman, early twenties. Twitchy. She knows us. *Something cold in her eyes. A flash and*

she's pointing a chrome-plated gun at Wyatt. "You're one dead pig!" She vanishes into the rat-hole slum behind her. Reggie radioing for backup. "Take the back, Ben!" Finding the rear door torn from its hinges, entering coming to a rear stairway, hearing Reggie running up the front stairs, calling. "Second floor, Ben!" Then a gunshot. More running. Another gunshot. "Third floor, Ben"' Wyatt taking the rear stairs two at time. Hearing a cracking crash, something metal banging, thumping down the front stairwell, Reggie shouting. "Goddamnit! Ben! Goddamnit!" Another gunshot as Wyatt mounts the rear stairs, panting, taking cover at a corner ten yards down the hall, smelling urine, cordite, sirens approaching, the scene hitting him. At the midway point to the third floor, Reggie had dropped to his waist through a rotted stair, trapped, his gun had fallen to the landing, out of reach, leaving him exposed to the suspect, her eyes glazed as she fired down on Reggie from the top of the stairs. 'Ben, Jesus! Shoot her!' Suddenly a boy, about twelve years old, steps from a door. In a heartbeat, the woman steps back from the stairway, puts her arm around the boy's throat, making him a shield. The boy struggling. She's out of Reggie's sight, extending her arm from behind the boy around her wall, the chrome muzzle flashing pop pop *like firecrackers, firing two more rounds at Reggie. "Christ, Ben, I'm hit. Shoot her! Goddamnit!' No clear shot. All he found were the widened eyes of the boy, forcing him to hesitate, Reggie shouting, the woman firing, then disappearing down the hall with the boy.*

That day rolled on like fog. A couple of black-and-whites had scooped the shooter two blocks away passed out on the street still carrying the empty gun. She had never recovered. Died of a cocaine overdose. No one had located the boy. In the days, then weeks that followed, Wyatt felt the investigators' sympathy for him sour into suspicion.

"Reggie got off two shots, yet you never fired a single round. Tell us again about the boy, Ben. Reggie never saw him. No one in the building ever saw him. No one in the canvas saw him. No one can find him. Tell us again about the boy."

The kid became known as "Wyatt's phantom," and while his account of the shooting was noted in the report, the unofficial version convicted Wyatt of the unforgivable sin of failing his partner.

The worst of it came the last time he saw Reggie in the hospital. A .38-caliber round was still lodged near his spine and the doctors were uncertain he would walk again. Reggie had looked as if half of his life had drained from him. He was sedated, Wyatt was anguished. It was bad.

"Ben, for the last time, I never saw a kid. Never heard a kid. I'll tell you what I saw: I saw you standing there frozen, like some sort of…"

"Like some sort of what?"

"Like some sort of goddamned coward, standing there frozen letting a freaked-out cokehead shoot me up. That is what I saw."

"I had my gun drawn, my finger was on the trigger, but she pulled the

kid. I swear there was a kid."

"I believe what I saw. You stay the hell away from me, Wyatt."

He never saw Reggie Pope again.

After parking, Wyatt took the stairs to his apartment on the edge of the Mission, near some old Section Eight housing. He moved here after his fiancée moved out on him from the trendy loft they had shared in North Beach. Opening the refrigerator to finish a half-eaten can of cold beans, he glanced at the calendar taped to the door, catching the upcoming Saturday she had highlighted almost a year ago. It was going to be their wedding day.

Old wounds. He knew he should have tossed the thing long ago but he could not bring himself to get a new calendar.

She had been a nurse at San Francisco General and had tried to help him after the shooting. But her friends were married to officers and in no time at all their suspicion had worked its way to her, bubbling to the surface one night at home a month after the shooting.

"Ben, are you certain there was a boy?"

His eyes were fixed to the TV.

"Because I talked to some of the shrinks at the hospital about posttraumatic stress and compensating for guilty feelings."

He stood up. Looked at her. "You don't believe me either."

"Ben, I was talking with some people at work and --"

"If you don't believe me, we have nothing."

"Ben." Tears filled her eyes.

"Nothing."

And that was it.

He had left for a long drive and refused to speak to her for days. A few weeks later she had decided he needed space to sort himself out, then moved in with a girlfriend. He refused to take her calls. Not long after that, she took a new job at a hospital in Los Angeles. Her engagement ring came back to him in the mail, taped to a tearstained note: *I was only trying to help, Ben, but you shut me out. I'll remember the good times. Good luck with your life.*

For weeks, even months after the shooting, Wyatt returned to the scene obsessed with finding the boy. It got around and it became a joke, on the street and in the force. Now he just drove the streets alone at night, a haunted man searching for some way to make sense of the few seconds that had cost him everything.

The spoon clinked as he tossed it into the empty tin can.

Would he ever be able to crawl out of this hole of misery? Was there anyone out there who would believe him, help him find his way back to the land of the living?

Sometimes for no reason, he saw the face of the shooter and would seethe with rage.

One more chance.

That was all he wanted.

One more chance to make it right.

His phone rang.

"Wyatt?"

"Yes."

"Samuels."

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"This is short notice but you're being detailed to assist on a homicide effective tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Report to Gonzales. Sydowski's the primary."

TEN

Less than twenty-four hours after Iris Wood had dared to step beyond her world, her naked corpse lay on a stainless-steel tray in the autopsy room of the San Francisco medical examiner's office in the Hall of Justice.

Female. White. Five-feet-four inches. One hundred twenty-two pounds. Thirty-two years old.

Sydowski looked upon her as Seaver conducted his work. A life taken with such wrath, such brazenness. There was the wedding dress, blood-drenched and shredded. Seaver and his assistant had taken care removing it, correlating the pierced fabric with the stab wounds, photographing it, examining it, recording their findings. The six-thousand dollar hand-crafted gown designed to be the centerpiece of a wedding, now evidence. They had attempted without success to develop latents from her skin. She had been dead for too long. Then Seaver and his assistant washed the body while Sydowski grappled with the questions gnawing at him.

Why such savagery and arrogant display? And how had he gotten her to the shop and into the dress, posed? The hows and whys. *Don't go down that road. Not yet. It will divert you. Look at what's real. What you know. Stick to the facts, the irrefutable facts. Use them as blocks to build the case. The autopsy could provide another block.*

But Sydowski didn't care for this part of the job, which seemed to have become harder after his wife had passed away. The coldness of the autopsy room, the smells of formaldehyde, ammonia, the egg-like odor of organs, their meaty shades of pink and red, the popping sound when the calvarium is removed, opening the skull to reveal the brain and dura, or seeing the primary Y incision across the chest, as the pathologist works through the identification, the external and internal examination of the body.

Years ago, when one of Sydowski's daughters was researching a school term paper on philosophy, she'd asked him a question that remained with him to this day. *"Did you ever see a person's soul in an autopsy, Dad?"* Now, in his old age, Sydowski was still searching in the presence of the dead, hoping to solve the riddles of life, and it was this secret quest that enabled him to endure each case.

Earlier in the procedure, Seaver's rubber-gloved right hand pointed a finger at the left upper neck area, drawing Sydowski and Turgeon's attention to a series of small paired reddened dots. The dots of each set were about two inches apart, as if someone had taken a pen and drew vampire bites. Turgeon exchanged glances with Sydowski and Seaver.

"Stun gun?" Sydowski had said.

Seaver had nodded.

When the autopsy was completed they met in Seaver's office. It had a flourishing Boston fern and a small bubbling aquarium with tiny, gliding angel fish. Living things, Sydowski thought.

"Iris Wood died where she was found sometime between ten P.M. and four A.M." Seaver's chair creaked.

Sydowski and Turgeon took notes.

"In my opinion, her death was caused by one of the fifty-three stab wounds to her heart, which was literally carved into pieces. Ten of the wounds pierced her back. They caused massive internal bleeding. No defensive wounds. No significant bruising near her arms where she was bound. Her fingernails appear absent of foreign material."

"How did he kill her without a struggle?" Turgeon said.

"The series of red markings on her neck are indicative of a stun gun, which can send a powerful jolt of electricity into the body, momentarily incapacitating the muscles and nervous system. I would say a stun gun was used."

"Any other injuries?" Sydowski said.

"None that would have caused death, no blunt trauma, no gunshot, or indication of strangulation. Toxicology will take some time, of course."

"But her face?"

"The gross mutilation." Seaver cleared his throat.

"Why? Any theories?"

"Part of his fantasy, possibly. Or twisted logic. Maybe's he was under the influence of a substance. Psychological profiling isn't my field. But given the state of the incisions, I would say a scalpel was used but not by a person possessing professional surgical skills. He likely used the stun gun to immobilize her during the mutilation. It was ante mortem."

"She was alive while he did this?"

"In and out of consciousness, but alive. Yes."

Sydowski looked at the aquarium, watching an angel fish floating tranquilly to the surface, breaking it before darting happily away.

"Ever see a soul, Dad?"

Later at his desk in the homicide detail, Sydowski slid on his bifocals to stare at Iris Wood's face. Plain. Fresh-scrubbed wholesome. Friendly. Brown hair. Hazel eyes. Warm eyes. What dreams did they hold? Did she have a good life? Why would someone take it with such vengeance? Did she know her killer?

Iris Wood offered no answers staring back from the clear color enlargement of her California driver's license photograph. But facts were coming. Pieces of truth. Slowly. Before the autopsy, they'd had a few breaks. Like finding her abandoned car near Stern Grove. They learned it was

registered to her. Records kicked out her driver's license, which gave them her thumbprint. Seaver obtained prints from the body's hands which SFPD Forensics compared with the DL records, which confirmed the identity of the corpse as that of Iris May Wood. On the car's windshield, they found an employee parking decal for American Eagle Federated Insurance, downtown on Montgomery. Sydowski called the building's night security guard. The parking permit was valid. The guard gave Sydowski the home number of American Eagle's vice president.

"Of course I'll help you right away, Inspector," the vice president said, "but I don't understand why you're inquiring about one of our employees."

"We have reason to believe she may have been harmed."

"Good God. Where is she now?"

"I can't confirm anything just yet. This is very serious. We'll need that information from you as soon as possible, please."

"Yes of course. My God. Let me make a few phone calls."

That was before the autopsy. Now Sydowski rubbed his eyes, staring at Iris Wood, waiting to learn more from her employer. Should have heard back by now. Turgeon was on the phone at her desk, making calls. Crime Scene had the car and Iris Wood's apartment.

It was an uphill one-bedroom in the Western Addition. Third floor of a Victorian mansion. The owner lived on the main floor. A soft-spoken man in his late sixties. Short with droopy eyes and a pencil-thin moustache matching his white wispy hair.

Sydowski and Turgeon had gone there directly from the spot where Iris Wood's car was found to determine if she lived alone and take a quick look before passing it to Crime Scene. Showing their stars, telling the owner they needed to go inside her apartment to check on her welfare, studying his face as concern crept into it.

"She lives alone. This is a very quiet building and she's a very quiet tenant," he told them, his keys jingling as they ascended the stairs. No reply to his knocking, which drew meowing from the other side. His hands shaking slightly, the landlord sighed and opened the door. Sydowski and Turgeon pulled on rubber gloves. A short-haired tabby leaped into the landlord's arms. "It's okay, Jack." He stroked its back as Sydowski and Turgeon walked through the apartment taking swift inventory when Turgeon spotted an SFSU brochure. The entry of an astronomy class was circled.

"Walt."

Sydowski put on his bifocals, bent down to read it without touching it.

"Her first class was last night." Turgeon took notes from the pamphlet.

The landlord was stroking the cat, blinking nervously, struggling to grasp a nightmare as Sydowski took down information from him, telling him the apartment would be locked. Turgeon used her cell phone to call for a uniform as Sydowski told the landlord police would now be guarding the apartment.

"We'll be back," he said.

Sydowski smelled fresh coffee. Turgeon placed an SFPD mug on his desk, rolled a chair next to him.

"Ran her prints through AFIS, NCIC, RCMP. Nothing. Still waiting on Interpol. No outstanding warrants. No traffic violations. Looks like she was a good girl, Walt." Turgeon studied Iris Wood's photograph. "Landlord tells us she seldom went out. Never brought dates home. What do you think?"

"We don't know enough about her yet. We've got a lot of work to do. We can kick theories around at tomorrow's meeting. I want to do another walk through the shop with Clarice Hay, to be certain nothing is missing or out of place."

Turgeon stared at Iris Wood's picture.

"Linda, it's been a long day and it will be another long one tomorrow. Go home."

"What are you waiting on?"

"Her employer is getting back to me. I'll call Leo then call it a night."

"I'll wait. I'm too jazzed for sleep."

Sydowski took a sip from his mug, leaned back in his chair. It felt good on his back. "All right then," he said. "Since it's been so long since you updated me on the soap opera that is your love life, tell me how things are going with the architect."

"We're definitely on again. He wants to get married. Wants babies."

"He still want you to leave cop world?"

"No. He got over that."

"But?"

"I just don't know if I'm ready. I mean it scares me, Walt."

"Scares you? You're a homicide cop. What scares you?

"No. It's hard to explain. We do what we do, we see what we see. Then to have a baby and love it so much knowing that monsters exist."

"You can't take this job personally. You're tired and we've had some pretty rough cases recently. Now this fire-breather. Just take it easy. I need you."

Sydowski's phone rang. It was the vice-president of American Eagle Federated Insurance.

"Inspector, can you give me more information on what harm you think may have come to Iris Wood?"

"I'm sorry sir, I can't at this time."

"I see. Given that you're a homicide investigator, I can only surmise where this is going."

"Were you able to obtain the information?"

"We're a large company. I don't know her. Not many people do. She works in researching and editing our publications."

"Any family listed in her personnel file?"

"None. I had someone access her policy. Every employee is entitled to a basic policy."

"Death benefit?"

"Yes, of course."

"How much was hers?"

"She's dead, isn't she? Someone killed her."

"I'm sorry. I just can't confirm anything right now."

"The policy has a graduated death payout depending on years with the company. Hers is eighty-six thousand, one-hundred. I checked in case she listed a relative as beneficiary."

"Is there a beneficiary?"

"Yes."

"A relative?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"It's her cat."

"Her cat?"

The vice president explained that the benefit was to be paid to the cat in her possession at the time of her death by way of a donation in the animal's name to a San Francisco animal shelter.

Sydowski made a few notes, absorbing that one.

"You said her job involves researching and editing publications."

"That's right."

"What sort of publications?"

"Brochures, information packages."

"On what subjects? Can you be more specific?"

"She wrote" -- the vice-president cleared his throat -- "she produced our main booklet and brochures that we provide to bereaved families, how to find comfort, solace when a loved one passes away."

Sydowski removed his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes, hearing his own caution coming up on him. *Do not go looking for this to make sense.*

"Inspector, is there anything more?"

"No." He replaced his glasses. "We'll be talking again tomorrow. Thank you."

ELEVEN

The first meeting on the investigation into the homicide of Iris May Wood was in an empty admin room on the fourth floor of the Hall of Justice.

By 7:30 A.M. it was filled with the heavy scent of cologne, the squeak of swivel chairs, and the smell of something suggesting coffee brewing in the anteroom as the dozen or so mostly male detectives and supervisors shuffled in. They slapped down notebooks, file folders, the morning editions of the Bay Area papers, draped jackets over their chairs, rolled up their sleeves, and bitched about police politics, overtime, support payments, ex-spouses and San Francisco's performance in pro sports.

Ben Wyatt arrived. With recognition, smiles faded, eyes strayed from conversations, catching his shoulder holster, his crisp shirt, knotted tie. Primed to work. He sat, opened his file to the two-page summary of the case, and began reading.

In no time at all, a large detective from Narcotics, huge chest straining his pin-striped shirt, glanced at the others, then at Wyatt, saying from behind his handlebar moustache, "That *really* you, Benjamin?" It was not a greeting but rather an alert to the group of his presence. *"It is you.* Ben Wyatt. Where the hell they been hiding you?"

Wyatt kept his face in his file. "Here and there."

"Complete your video-game therapy there, all-star?"

Wyatt chewed on the remark. Sydowski entered, stopping in his tracks, his attention shooting to Wyatt. Conversations ended. A few chairs creaked as the room tensed. The coffee machine in the anteroom hissed.

"You're Ben Wyatt?"

Wyatt looked at him.

"Reggie Pope's *former* partner?"

Wyatt nodded.

"Why are you here?"

"I've just been detailed. My lieutenant assigned me last night."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is my case and nobody told me." The gold in Sydowski's teeth glinted. "Let me ask you something, Wyatt." Sydowski removed his jacket slowly. "How's your partner doing? You see him lately? You keep in touch?"

Wyatt stared at his file. "Look, nobody understands."

"I understand, Wyatt. I think we all understand."

"Walt," Sydowski's boss, Leo Gonzales, stepped from the coffee room,

gripping a full pot. “Got some fresh coffee here. I’d like to pour you some.”

Sydowski burned a departing stare into Wyatt before stepping into the anteroom. Gonzales reconsidered, then took Sydowski into the hallway, closing the door behind them.

“I want him out, Leo.”

“Not going to happen.”

“That guy is not a cop. He’s a waste of skin.”

“Walt. It’s out of our hands. He is assigned to this investigation. Period.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this last night?”

“You needed your sleep.”

Sydowski unbuttoned his collar, loosened his tie, and stretched his neck muscles.

“Leo, I saw Reggie the other day for the first time in a long time. Christ, he was rooting through trash on the street outside of Nick’s. You wouldn’t even recognize him. He’s a ghost. And all because that guy in there, with his nice shirt and tie, and new holster, did not have the guts to back him up.”

“Keep it down and take it easy, will you?”

“I lost touch with Reggie myself. He’s fallen through the cracks, Leo. We’ve got to do something for him.”

“All right. We can look into that. I’ll talk to some people, but right now you lock on to this case. Totally.”

“I want Wyatt out.”

“No. He’s on the team and you’re going to have to deal with that. Frankly, I expected a higher caliber of professionalism from you, Walt.”

Sydowski shook his head, stared at his feet and cursed.

“Fine, Leo. He does what I tell him to do.”

“You’re the primary. It’s your show.”

“He gets periphery, superficial stuff and he works alone. The less I see of him the better.”

Gonzales nodded, removed his cigar, jabbing it at Sydowski. “And you focus on clearing this thing. Did you even look at this morning’s papers? Front page. BRIDAL SHOP HORROR. They are already chewing on my butt upstairs because they’re catching heat on this from City Hall and the commission.” His eyes bored into Sydowski. “Walt, we’ve got to clear this case. Got that?”

Sydowski popped a Tums into his mouth then led the meeting, dissecting the investigation, assigning teams to examine its key aspects by retracing the final steps of Iris May Wood’s life. They would go to her office, her neighborhood, they would canvas where her car was found, talk to her astronomy class, and campus security. They would go to the bridal shop and question everyone who had anything to do with that store, or with the woman whose gown was used. They would double-check patrol unit logs and

complaints for the key area, taxis, security people, everything.

"Somebody out there saw something," Sydowski said.

They had her apartment, phone records, her computer. Crime Scene still had the bridal store and they were awaiting results on the search of trash bins near the boutique. So far, no weapon, no trace, no latents, nothing. It was abnormally clean.

"She got family, Walt?"

"None that we know of so far."

Then there were the other intriguing pieces, like making her cat and the animal shelter beneficiaries. They would interview shelter people, run background. And how the security cameras in the bridal boutique failed to record anything. The same for the exterior cameras of other businesses in the area.

"This was too ritualistic, too organized to be a random, impulse thing. It may be fantasy-driven, could be he knew her or knew her *type.* I mean it appears she lived a quiet life alone with her cat. She may have been *selected.* She could also be a message, signifying something he hates or fears. Maybe he was somehow wronged. Whatever he is, I'll bet my pension he's going to do it again."

"How do you know that?"

"Because we haven't caught him yet."

TWELVE

Reed's story was the line, running six columns under the *San Francisco Star's* flag over a large color photo of canvas covering the corpse in the display window of Forever & Ever. The secondary art showed a model in a Veronica Chan wedding gown, taken from a feature the *Star* did on Forever.

Reed shoved his cereal aside. His stomach heaved as he compared his work to his competition. The *Chronicle* had killed him, victory staring back at him from a color head-and-shoulders photo of Iris May Wood, *confirmed by sources* to be the victim found in the Union Square bridal boutique. Reed's story failed to ID the victim.

Reed switched on the TV set on the new kitchen counter and surfed through local morning news shows. All quoted the *Chronicle,* flashing Iris Wood's picture. He had been beaten. Why did he not trust his gut? He *had* a lead on her name late last night and a tip that she worked downtown at an insurance company. He couldn't get anyone to confirm it at deadline. Who confirmed it for the *Chronicle?* Reed devoured their story. It confirmed that Wood worked at American Eagle Federated Insurance. Reed forgot to follow through on the abandoned car, check for dealer stickers, club or association decals, an employee parking sticker. Run down the tag.

"Damn!" He slammed his palm on the breakfast table. He didn't need this now.

"Tom. What's going on out there?" Ann called from the bathroom where she had spent much of the morning with Zach, who was sick again.

"Nothing."

Reed heard Ann start the shower. In a few minutes she would emerge to begin the inquisition.

He had picked up Zach last night in Berkeley after filing his story at the paper. By the time Ann had arrived home from Los Angeles later that night, Reed and Zach were asleep.

Zach had woken early, vomiting again. Ann went to him. He didn't sound too bad. Eventually, Reed rolled out of bed and headed to the door to get the newspapers. Now, sitting at the kitchen table, staring at them and snatches of the TV news, he heard Sydowski's advice ringing in his ears. *"Stay with this one."*

He knew he would pay a price for failing to identify Iris Wood. But something far more significant loomed. Reed sensed this murder was just a knothole glimpse into something colossal, something terrible. He could almost smell it. But that didn't matter now with his wife standing before him, silk blouse, hands on hips, gorgeous eyes filled with righteous anger.

"So when were you going to reveal to me that you took Zachary to the doctor, Tom?"

"Today. Good morning, dear. How was Los Angeles?"

Ann got a grapefruit and kiwi from the refrigerator. Slammed the door. Poured coffee. Stood at the counter. Glared at the muted TV news. Shook her head while slicing into her grapefruit.

"Let's see if I've got it right, Tom." Juice-dripping blade pointed at him. "Zach is sick. You take him to the doctor. Give me some line about milk."

"I bought milk yesterday and drank it."

"You dump him on my mother so you can go to work on your day off. Have I got it?"

"The doctor said he was fine but wants him to see an allergist. I got called out to a story and your mother was happy to have Zach for the day. Cripes, Ann, you act like I sold him to crack dealers."

"I am worried about him. He's sick with something and you don't seem to care."

"I rushed him to the doctor yesterday. She said he was fine and he *was* fine. Call your mother. Ask her. Once we left our house he seemed to be okay."

"When is he supposed to see the allergist?"

"I'm not sure. Dr. Cranson wanted you to call her, I think.

"Crenshaw. Doctor Crenshaw." Ann carved hard into her fruit. "Weren't you supposed to be off yesterday? That's why I went to L.A."

"Brader called me. Demanded I come in. He was going to fire me if I refused."

Ann bit into her fruit, chewing.

"Just quit. Quit, Tom, and write your books. We can swing it from the stores."

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Admit it. You're addicted to it. It's like a drug for you. You can't see how it's messing with your priorities. It always has."

"Hey, don't worry, baby. I've got my priorities in order." Reed lifted his mug to sip coffee. A blue slip of paper was stuck to the bottom of it.

"What is that?" Ann rushed over, snapped it. "This is Zach's appointment with the allergist! *Tom, it's this morning!"*

Neither of them noticed Zach, wearing sneakers, a faded red 49ers T-shirt, white chinos, hands in his pockets. He was a little pale, a few morning cowlicks, but looked fine. He was behind the counter staring at the muted TV news.

"Can I go to school today, Mom?"

Ann was reading the note; then her watch, calculating the time she needed.

"How you doing, pal?" Reed said.

"Okay. I'm really hungry." Zach pointed at the news. "Dad, is that the

murdered woman from the bridal shop?"

Ann's attention shot between Reed and Zach. "How does he know *that?"* She switched the set off, seized the *Chronicle* from Reed, speeding through the article. "It was on the radio news in the taxi last night. It's horrible." She saw the *Star* and her husband's byline. *"This* was the story you got called on?"

"Oh yeah, Mom. She was mutilated or something. Did dad tell you? He talked to a guy who found her."

"Tom, how does he know this?"

"Well, Ann you see --"

"Dad took me to the scene. It was so cool."

"You took him to a homicide! This homicide! She thrust the *Chronicle* in Reed's face.

"Well, it was on the way to Berkeley --"

The phone began ringing. Zach got it.

"How could you!" Ann threw the papers at him. "After all he's been through. All we've been through!"

"Ann. It was not like --"

"Dad. It's for you."

"Tom, I cannot believe this. Zach, come on. We've got to get going."

"Dad? Phone?"

Reed took the call.

"This is Brader. I want you to get your ass in the newsroom now!"

Reed muttered.

"What's that, Reed? You're quitting?"

"I said I'm coming, *Clyde,* don't wet your pants."

Iris Wood stared at Reed from the crumpled front page.

Stay with this one.

The *San Francisco Star's* building was downtown at the edge of the Financial District. Reed stepped off the elevator into the newsroom, expecting to be fired before he reached his desk.

In Metro, many reporters and editors were settling into their cubicles or working at their computers. Phones trilled, keyboards clicked, and conversations, muted radio scanners, TV newscasts from sets on overhead shelves and the smell of coffee, filled the air. Brader's glassed-walled office was empty but the jaws of his briefcase yawned on his office table.

He was around.

Reed yanked off his jacket, placed it on the hook at his cubicle, and loosened his tie. He surveyed yesterday's chaos on his desk; it looked like an explosion at a paper recycling plant. The red message light on his phone was blinking. His computer indicated he had twenty unanswered e-mails. Reed removed his glasses and ran a hand across his face. His phone jangled and he

grabbed it.

"Get in here!" Brader said.

The fronts of the *Star* and *Chronicle* were open on the table in Brader's office.

"Confirms what I've known about you, Reed. You are overrated." Every hair of Brader's impressive silvery white wavy cut was in place. Scarlet silk tie expertly knotted, sleeves of his cream-colored button-down shirt rolled with surgical precision.

Here it comes, Reed thought, searching the desk for his termination papers. The guy who started in the business next to him was about to kill his career.

"Reed, you have rendered the *San Francisco Star* irrelevant as a news provider. This was, and is, *the story,* and we dropped the ball, because of you."

"Gosh, Clyde, if you thought it was *the story,* why did you only assign one reporter to it? But that could not have anything to do with you, seeing how you are the person paid to make that decision. The person who called me at my home on my day off and threatened me with my job?"

Brader invaded Reed's personal space. "Shut the hell up and listen to me."

"You're making another decision?"

"I am giving you one final chance to make sure the *Star* claims ownership of this story and you keep your job. One chance, Reed."

"What's that?"

"I want you all over this story and I want you to profile Iris Wood. Give us an in-depth feature, with exclusive revelations. *Exclusive.* Tell this city who this woman was, the life she lived and how she ended in a wedding gown carved up on display in a San Francisco bridal shop. I want dark poetry, Reed. Sixty exclusive inches for the weekend. Fail and you're gone. Now get out."

Reed deposited himself before his terminal and began opening and discarding e-mail, much of it garbage. The chinking of Molly Wilson's bracelets sounded her presence at the neighboring cubicle.

"Reed?"

"Leave a message."

"Reed," Wilson stood, swung her bag over her shoulder, grabbed his arm. "Get your stuff, I'm buying you a coffee. Across the street. Now."

Wilson was the favorite Bay Area reporter in most cop circles. She could out-write, out-report and out-drink most hacks. The FBI called Wilson "eye-candy." The SFPD TAC commander requested through the chief's office that she not be visible at tense standoffs after she momentarily distracted a sniper at a hostage-taking.

At the coffee shop Wilson told Reed what had happened on the story.

"When it broke, I wanted to rush down, but Brader kept me back. He said you had called in to say you happened to be right there. We thought you had it

under control."

Reed shook his head, as Wilson told him how that morning one of the *Star's* senior editors tore a strip off of Brader for not assigning enough people to the bride murder.

"I overheard them this morning near the news library. Brader said it was time to ship you out of Metro. Violet shut him down and demanded to know who made the call to understaff the story. Violet's calling this one now, Tom. She was the one who wanted you on the feature."

"Explains why Brader pulled his punches. I thought he was going to can me. And I thought he sounded like Violet when he's telling me to deliver 'dark poetry.' " Reed swallowed some coffee. "What about you?"

"I'm on it too."

"Fine, we can cover more ground that way. I should get going on learning about Iris."

"Tom." There was an important question in Wilson's coffee and she stared at it waiting for it to surface. "You and Brader go back to your days at the AP. What kind of guy is he?"

"Why?"

"I haven't breathed a word of this to anyone. You have to keep this just between us. Promise?"

"I swear."

"Remember Zeke Canter's send-off party?"

"Sure. Big drunk. Everyone thought it strange how Brader was there, slithering around."

"Brader's still married, right?"

"Yes. Got kids, the whole thing."

"Well he made a pass at me. In fact, kept making them all night and he was not that drunk. I don't think he was drunk. At one point, he pins me alone in a corner, advises me to hitch myself to his star because he guarantees that he will have Violet's job inside of a year."

"He's a vampire, Wilson. Benson was a stooge, this guy's the prince of darkness. A cold, calculating, manipulating --"

Reed's cell phone rang. "Yeah."

"This Tom Reed whose name is on today's column about that murdered woman?"

"Yes. Who's calling, please?"

"Never mind that now. Do you deal and protect sources?"

"Been known to happen."

Reed heard nothing. "Hello…"

Silence. He raised his eyebrows to Wilson, then hung up.

"Strange call."

"What about?"

"Sources and the case."

Reed's phone rang again. It was the same caller. "What's going on

there?”

“Had to switch phones, Reed. To protect myself.”

“From what?”

“The truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“I know who killed that woman.”

THIRTEEN

The Forever & Ever bridal shop remained shrouded by the huge canvas. Yellow police tape still protected the scene. More flowers had accumulated on the sidewalk in front of the boutique where Olivia had placed the first one. Her white rose.

Theories and rumors swirled over the crime during the lunchtime rush at Caselli's. It was a cult thing, it was an ex-boyfriend, an ex-girlfriend, a crime of fashion, mob, drugs, psycho. Nothing made sense, Olivia thought, after staring at Iris Wood's picture in the *Chronicle* all morning.

The insurance company where she had worked was a few blocks away. Had Iris Wood ever shopped at Caselli's? Had anyone ever purchased a gift for her here? She had been thirty-two years old. They were almost the same age. She had lived alone. Olivia stared at her face, feeling the stirrings of kinship with Iris Wood. In some mysterious way she had rescued Olivia, her tragic death fuelling her determination to ensure that *her* life mattered by holding Olivia to the promise she had made to herself on the bridge.

The lunch-hour traffic subsided and Olivia worked quickly on the next day's e-mail orders, then ate her lunch in the store. A fresh salad with French dressing and some fruit. She flipped through the new magazines she picked up on her way to work and scanned articles on FINDING LOVE ON-LINE, a fun item on TEN WAYS TO OVERCOME SHYNESS, an edgy one called, SEX, LIES AND CYBERSPACE, and one SURFING FOR SINGLES. Olivia chuckled through most of them. Common sense was the common thread.

In the store's back room, Olivia started the kettle for tea, catching herself in the mirror, her neat slacks, print top. She studied her hair, her face.

"Brave enough to try a little tune-up?"

Olivia picked up the phone, called her hairdresser, and booked an appointment before she could change her mind.

"Here I go," she said to no one, making tea and sitting before the store computer.

That morning at home, Olivia visited several on-line dating sites. She had posted a humorous plea for advice for shy girls trying to meet decent guys.

What's the best approach?

She had checked her Internet e-mail for responses.

The first one had said: *Hey, livinsf, just be yourself. If a guy cannot accept you for who you are, he's not for you.*

Next: *You out there in San Francisco, that is pretty wicked about that bride murder. Saw it on CNN and the Chronicle Web site.*

Olivia responded: *It's very sad. I walk by that shop every day to the place*

where I work.

Next came a new message from the person who earlier had asked Olivia what exactly she looked for in a man. Olivia had responded that she had looked for honesty.

Then there had been a new question for her: *Dear livinsf: Honesty. That's good. I like that. Now help me with this: If you found the right man for you, could you forgive any sins in his past life?*

FOURTEEN

Iris Wood's landlord was sitting in a creaking wicker rocker on the front porch when Sydowski and Turgeon arrived. His face was ashen; Iris's cat was rubbing against his leg.

"How are you holding up?" Sydowski said.

The landlord shrugged.

"The people from Crime Scene are wrapping up, so Linda and I are going to spend some time alone in her apartment to look for anything that might help us."

The landlord collected Jack the cat into his arms. "I just don't understand," he said. "She was such a good person. Wouldn't harm a soul. Lived here for three years. Always smiled, always said hello." His eyes glistened. Turgeon placed a hand on his shoulder. "I read the papers, watched the news. What sort of depraved person could do such a thing?" He stared at both detectives for a moment, his thin moustache quivering. "Do you think she suffered?"

Turgeon and Sydowski exchanged glances.

"We have lots of questions too," Sydowski said; then he and Turgeon headed up the stairs to the apartment. Iris Wood's cat leapt from the landlord's arms and followed them.

Sydowski signed the receipt sheet for the apartment key as the last members of the weary crime scene team departed.

For a long silent moment, Sydowski and Turgeon stood in the center of the large living room and scanned it as Jack padded off. The walls were the color of a tropical bay with pearl trim moldings. The oak floors gleamed from the sunlight splashing through the customized wall-to-ceiling window facing the north. It offered a sliver view of the Golden Gate. Sydowski detected the fragrant hint of mandarin oranges.

There was a small Indian rug near the glass-top coffee table and couch; above it was a large framed painting of a girl alone on a beach, cutting a forlorn figure gazing at a vast azure ocean and an eternal horizon.

"Hi, Iris." A strange woman's voice broke the silence. "It's Mel at the office. Are you coming in today, dear? We haven't heard from you."

Turgeon was replaying calls on the telephone answering machine.

"It's the only message," she said.

Sydowski nodded to the desk, computer, and work area.

"You take this room, Linda. I'll start on the others."

The bedroom walls were yellow cream, a framed Van Gogh print over the four-poster bed. Neatly made with a quilted bedspread and throw pillows.

A telephone and paperback were on the nightstand. Sydowski slipped on his bifocals. *Gone With the Wind.* The tassel of a bookmark protruded at the halfway point. Jack meowed from his regal spot on the bed.

Sydowski went to the four-drawer wooden dresser against the wall. Cotton pajamas. Panties, socks, bras, shorts, Tshirts, pullover tops, a swimsuit. All neatly arranged. Nothing unusual. Nothing kinky to indicate a secret life.

He opened the jewelry box atop the dresser to find Iris Wood looking at him from a snapshot framed inside the lid. Far removed from the bridal shop, the cold autopsy room, and her driver's license. His first unofficial glimpse of her alive.

Iris, part of a trio of women, was standing behind an office desk and a small cake with lighted candles, waves of white icing. *Congratulations, Jan* looped elegantly across the top. The woman in the center looked to be in her early twenties and pregnant. She was beaming. The other woman, early thirties was grinning. And there was Iris. Living her life. Wearing a beige skirt and matching top. Smiling as if forced to. Standing stiffly. Self-conscious. Sad. A hint of desperation in her pretty eyes.

Sydowski blinked behind his glasses. The photograph was smeared with fingerprint powder from the crime scene crew. He tucked it inside the breast pocket of his jacket, sifted through the small collection of earrings, necklaces and bracelets. He closed the lid on the jewelry box, then opened the folding doors of her closet, to the modest wardrobe of Ms. Iris May Wood. Single, working woman. Sleeveless sheath dresses, button-front cotton prints, embroidered jacket, dress suits, knit tops, pleated twill pants, some stretch pants. Fat pants. *Not that she needed them.* Jeans, shorts, a floral-print kimono. He imagined her in the kimono snuggled on her couch watching a girl movie, Jack curled on her lap. Sydowski surveyed the shoes on the closet floor, fabric pumps, scuffed flared-heeled loafers, white joggers, and frayed thong slippers. He detected a plastic bottle of foot deodorizer pushed nearly out of sight in the closet. She was sensitive about foot odor. Sydowski closed the door and headed to the bathroom.

It was clean and bright with a pleasant trace of lavender; tumble-stone floor tiles, matching rose-tinted wall tiles, a soaker tub, pedestal sink with brass fixtures, shampoo, conditioner, wheat germ soap, skin creams, bath oils, candles, potpourri on the toilet's water closet, thick towels hanging from the wall rack. He opened the medicine cabinet over the sink. One tooth brush. No regular boyfriend, or girlfriend, he figured, studying the bottles and boxes, aspirin, cough syrup, eye drops, calcium, over-the-counter sleeping pills, vitamins, the usual array of women's hygienic items. No prescriptions. Sydowski closed the vanity, scanning the glass shelf under it, antiperspirant, toothpaste, mascara, lip gloss, eye shadow, hair spray, moisturizer, baby oil, nail-polish remover.

He studied the mirror for a long moment, the very mirror she had stood

before in the final hours of her life. Sydowski looked beyond his own reflection, staring hard as if he could retrieve the face that was once there for a message, for a clue, for direction on where to search to avenge her death.

How did he know you? Tell me that and I will find him.

He felt the cat weaving itself around his ankles; then Sydowski moved on to the kitchen.

"Already went through it, Walt." Turgeon was seated before the computer clicking and typing. "Single-girl fare." Sydowski looked. Healthy frozen low-cal single-serving dishes, vegetables for salad, flavored tea, juice, bottled water, comfort food like gourmet ice cream and microwave popcorn. And take out menus for Chinese and pizza. Stuff for Jack under the sink.

Turgeon was concentrating on the computer screen.

Sydowski looked through the living room. He scanned her CD player and flipped through her music, Bruce Hornsby, Jann Arden, Bruce Springsteen, Van Morrison, Annie Lennox, Neil Young, some old Beatles stuff. Then he went to the titles of hardcovers on the floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Contemporary bestselling novels, a smattering of literary classics, Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hugo, Tolstoy, Pasternak. He pulled some from the shelf. They looked as if they had been read. Sydowski then selected a worn Bible, the kind found in most hotels. Fanning the pages, a notation blurred by. He stopped, found it in The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, chapter forty-two. A small, neat hand-written note penned in the blue ink of a fountain pen, said *Comfort in time of loneliness,* and underlined the passage: *Fear thou not; for I am with thee.*

She was lonely and self-conscious. *Hiding her foot powder.* Sydowski was almost certain she was not the victim of a random crime. Because of the specific mutilation, the way she was displayed, her death had been organized, planned, calculated. It was ritual. He had selected her because he knew her, or knew her type.

But how did he know you, Iris?

Sydowski replaced the bible.

He saw Iris Wood's phone bills, credit card bills, and other papers stacked next to Turgeon near the computer and shuffled through them. They already had people running down her most recent phone calls, credit card purchases, and the status on her bank accounts.

Sydowski checked his watch. "We should head to her office."

"I hear your wheels turning, Walt."

"At this point, Linda, I'd say she lived a quiet life."

"Lived much of it on-line. Look."

Screen upon screen of bookmarked sites all relating to lonely-hearts clubs, on-line dating, chat rooms and cyber-clubs for singles scrolled down the monitor, reflecting on Sydowski's bifocals as he bent down for a closer look.

"It's massive," Turgeon said. "She's locked on to hundreds and

hundreds, maybe in the thousands, of sites."

Sydowski's eyes widened slightly as he realized the potential number of people *around the world* that Iris Wood could have had contact with. He stood, shaking his head.

"We're going to need help with this aspect of the case," Turgeon said.

"Yup." Sydowski, removed his bifocals, muttering something about computers.

"Now, I'm not an expert but I know who is, Walt."

"Who, Linda?"

"Ben Wyatt."

FIFTEEN

Pulling his Taurus out of the *Star's* parking lot downtown, Reed decided Geary, then Divisadero would be the best route to his secret meeting with his anonymous source who promised to tell him who killed Iris Wood.

The caller had offered no details. Wanted to meet Reed within an hour at a specific bench at the northeast corner of Golden Gate Park, near the hospital.

Reed had nothing on at the moment, so he figured he would give it a shot. He dropped the Ford's front windows, switched on his favorite rock station in time to catch the beginning of "Layla." He pumped up the volume.

This guy sounded like a nut who's seen too many bad conspiracy movies. He is either going to want money, a favor, or demand the *Star* publish his ten-thousand-word manifesto on the parallel universe. Reed shook his head. He had met all kinds.

Upon arriving, Reed's chief concern was not meeting a stranger, but parking. It was damned near impossible to find a spot anywhere in the city and he was afraid he'd get nailed after he slipped his Ford into a vacant slot in a restricted area.

Ah, to hell with it. Reed hurried to the park carrying a rolled-up newspaper, as his caller had requested.

He found the bench and immediately set a twenty-minute deadline for Mr. X to show up. He really should be chasing Sydowski right now. The only thing this would achieve would be a parking ticket.

Reed took stock of his immediate area. A couple of neo-Haight types playing guitars, a mom with a baby in a stroller. Nothing. Bored, he unfurled the papers, the *Chronicle* and the *Star,* to once again study the reports on Iris Wood.

A shadow fell over him.

"You Tom Reed from the paper?"

Reed recognized the voice of the caller, now standing before him. A slight man in his late twenties. About five feet nine inches. One hundred forty pounds. White, head shaved. Goatee. Black jeans. Black T-shirt. A candidate for state time. Spider web tattoo on his right forearm. Stud in his left lobe. Grey eyes. Runny nose. Cokehead.

"Yeah, I'm Tom Reed."

"Got ID?"

Reed produced his press photo ID and a business card.

"No tape recorders, I want to check you."

Reed stood. "What's your name."

"Slim. Call me Slim."

"Listen Slim, you are not touching me. I'm not recording this. You called me. Now say what you've got to say because I've got to be somewhere."

"Okay." Slim rubbed his chin, sniffing. Looking around, licking his lips. "You got good police contacts for the district down near Stern Grove?"

Reed nodded. That was where they had found Iris Wood's car.

"Listen, I had nothing to do with what happened to that woman."

"Take it easy."

"I am so jammed up, man. I don't know where to turn. I don't know. They're gonna put this crap on me."

"Slow down. Who is going to put what on you? Slim sit down beside me."

Slim fished matches and a pack of Camels from his pocket, lit one and drew on it deeply, before sitting next to Reed.

"I'm on parole, okay? The program ain't workin' for me. See, I got a bad habit and I'm down near the south side of the Grove. I had been scoping out some houses down there and I got a line that some people are going to be on vacation, okay?"

Reed nodded.

"So I am going to move on this place, but I got a curfew, so I got to do it early."

Reed felt pieces of his story coming together.

"It's a great night for me, fog is thick, area secluded. I've got the jewelry maybe, three, four grand in quick cash. I'm cutting out clean, heading for the street when I just about have a heart attack." Slim dragged on his cigarette. "I'm leaving when I see an unmarked police car throw the red right on the street in front of me. Hell, I thought I was busted. But he's making a stop. Stopping a car."

Reed's newspapers rustled as Slim tapped them with his cigarette hand. "*Her car.* The cop is stopping her Ford Focus."

"What did you do?"

"I step back slowly near a tree. I mean like, I am *there.* It's dark and they are like shadows, but I just hear their voices. The cop stops her and begins to write her up. Then he hits her or something, and drives off with her."

"Why didn't you call it in?"

"Give me a break." He pulled on his cigarette. "Listen, I didn't know what happened. I thought, okay. Cop makes a stop, woman gets sick, or faints like or something, and he takes her to the hospital. Then I see the news. I read the papers. I start to figure it out."

"Are you sure it was a cop?"

"I'm a con."

"You get a plate number?"

"No."

"What kind of car?"

"Full-sized unmarked sedan. Ford or Chevy."

"But you're not certain, Crown Vic, Impala, Caprice?"

"No."

"What about grill lights and a flash pattern, like strobe or wigwag, notice anything like that?"

"I can only say that it was an unmarked car."

"So you think they'll somehow implicate you?"

Slim tossed his cigarette. "Listen, if that cop who murdered her finds out I was boosting jewelry at the very time I saw him, then I am a dead man. Dead. I am a thief. I ain't no killer. They're gonna put it on me. They can do that. The guys inside have told me stories, man."

"Take it easy. What do you want from me? If your information is true, I want to report it. And who's to say the police don't already know this?"

"That's just it. Find out. You're my protection. I have to go."

"How do I reach you?"

"I'll call you."

Slim turned to walk away.

"Wait," Reed said. "How do I know you didn't kill her?"

He was gone.

So were the other people in the area.

Reed sat there for a moment trying to comprehend what he had just heard. It was astounding. A cop. Unless Slim was the killer. Reed stood up and made the one-block walk back to his car, glad he had alerted the photo desk at the *Star* prior to this thing.

Reed drove six blocks away to a Burger King, the rendezvous point with Henry Cain, a news photographer. During Reed's meeting with his source, Cain had positioned himself some sixty yards away with a telephoto lens -- the same long lens he used at 49-er games -- taking pictures of Reed with his source. Between bites of his Whopper, Cain showed them to Reed on his digital Nikon. A series of crisp shots clearly identifying Slim.

Picture after picture.

SIXTEEN

The coffee in Wyatt's takeout cup rippled at the surface as he sipped from it, swallowing hard.

It had been a long time since he had been on the street. Waiting at the rear of Forever & Ever, he was jittery, feeling the weight of his gun in his shoulder holster and everything it signified in the rubble of his life.

Wyatt took another hit of coffee. As nerve-shattering as this was, he needed to do this. There was no escaping it. At any moment he could again be forced to draw his weapon and make another life-and-death decision.

I hope not.

He had already paid an enormous price. He was an outcast. Scorned. Expected to fail. It was killing him. Rage seethed in his gut but he wrestled it down with the realization that this case was his only hope, his last chance to make it all right again. To prove he was a solid cop. If he failed, he failed completely, because he had nothing left to lose. Fate had him by the balls. He crumpled the cup and tossed it in the trash.

No sign of Veronica Chan.

Wyatt nodded to the uniform posted at the rear and went inside to look around while waiting for her. This assignment Sydowski had spat at him was superficial. Wyatt's job was to review the bridal shop's security videotape which showed nothing, according to Sydowski and the crime scene people who had already watched it about a dozen times before putting Wyatt on it. After that, he was told to go find out why the shop's security cameras apparently malfunctioned, and to try to obtain the video security tapes of surrounding businesses, in case one of them picked up something.

Wyatt and every other detective on the case knew full well much of that had already been done. He figured they were just keeping him out of the way, ensuring all he did was annoy people by asking them questions they'd already answered.

So here he was staring at mannequins in wedding dresses, his world hanging by a thread, a man alone in his skin, nothing waiting for him at home but a can of beans in an empty fridge. And this was a good day.

"Inspector Wyatt, is it?"

He turned to a stunning woman, in a tailored suit. Model's figure. In her early thirties. Cleopatra shoulder-length hair framing a stone-cold face.

"Yes." He extended his hand.

She offered hers. Small. Same warmth as her face.

"Veronica Chan," she said. "We've been through all of this with your colleagues and I really don't appreciate the police department's repetitions."

Wyatt nodded, removing a notebook. “I know. I’ll try to be specific and quick.”

Her eyes went to the internal tarp protecting the display window.

“Do we have to do this here? I can’t stand being so close to where she was,” she said, taking him to the office. Chan dropped herself in a chair. “My business partner, Julie is under a doctor’s care. Told me she’ll never set foot in this shop again. Our staff’s been traumatized. One has resigned. Orders have been canceled. The Carruthers party is threatening to sue us. I just came from seeing our lawyer. She’s not certain if our insurance covers us. So who do I sue?”

Wyatt passed her a tissue. “I don’t know, ma’am.”

Chan touched her eyes, collecting herself. “On the phone you said you needed more information about the security system?”

“Just tell me about it.”

“We forbid shoppers to come in and photograph our gowns. The cameras remind them we’re serious.”

“Protection of your designs?”

“Exactly. Take a picture, then have a friend do a cheap knock off, almost an infringement.”

“Can you show me the control and monitor?”

Chan took him to a rear room, explaining there were four cameras, including one with a fish-eye lens for the rear entrance.

Wyatt monitored all perspectives from the device that had a small TV-like monitor and a recorder that resembled a high-tech VCR player.

“And it’s run on a slow speed seventy-two-hour loop? That is, all four cameras are recording nonstop?”

Chan nodded.

Wyatt opened his file folder and the report from Crime Scene. The system was operated by Digicamwatch. The company attributed the failure to suspected grit on the recording heads, but was doing further checks. Wyatt looked at the report and punched the number of Digicamwatch’s contact person into his cell phone.

“DCW, Tony Dekka.”

The guy sounded as if he were twelve. “Tony, Ben Wyatt with the SFPD. You’re the contact for the system at the bridal shop down at Union Square?”

“Yes, sir. Glad you called.”

Wyatt wedged his phone between his ear and shoulder, pulling the system from the wall. “Why’s that, Tony?”

“We did more checks at our end, sir, and just got some new information.”

Wyatt studied the web of wires and cables running from the security system’s controls.

“Sir?”

“Go ahead.”

“Seems there was a power burp in that area and we figure that might have

been the cause. A few other clients in that area were hit too."

Wyatt visually lined up every cable and wire to account for it. Camera one, Camera two, Camera three, four, direct power cord, alarm…

"But, Tony, isn't there auxiliary? Every system's got that because first thing bad guys do is cut power."

"Yes. Are you near the system now, sir?"

"Yes."

Wyatt tapped his finger to a small power pack on the rear.

"At the rear is an auxiliary power source. It's got tiny cadmium batteries, takes over if the direct source fails."

"Which you are telling me happened, Tony? So why did the system record no activity in the shop when clearly there was?"

"Sir, unfortunately when the power burped, there was a two-second delay, before the auxiliary took over."

"I know." This was not rocket science, Wyatt thought as he continued his inventory of all the wiring.

"Well it appears that …"

"What is it, Tony?"

"Legal just told us we're supposed to refer this stuff to them."

"Tony, do you want to face an obstruction of justice charge?"

A long heavy silence passed; then Tony dropped his voice to a whisper. "I told them you're going to find out. Sir, we think the auxiliary failed to kick on."

Wyatt flipped to Crime Scene's report. They had already checked the auxiliary system and found it functioning.

"That could be a problem," Wyatt said just as he found one line that disturbed him and not a word about it in the report. It ran from the security system to the shop's telephone box.

"Tell me something, Tony, is this particular system monitored by your office by computer through the phone line?"

"Oh, sure. All of our systems are," he said. "But they're one hundred per cent secure. No one from the outside can penetrate them."

Wyatt's jaw muscles tightened. "You got today's *Chronicle* handy, the front page, Tony?"

He heard him grunting.

"Got it."

"I want you to look into the face of Iris Wood and repeat out loud what you just told me. That no one from the outside can penetrate your system. Got that? You stare into that face and you keep repeating that."

SEVENTEEN

Turgeon was losing her patience with Sydowski as they drove to American Eagle Federated Insurance, downtown on Montgomery.

"We're in this together so you better talk to me."

Sydowski rubbed his face, thinking. "I just have a bad feeling about this one. I can't find the handle on it."

"It's early yet."

"I always get a sense of where to go on a file. But not here. And to top it off, you want to bring Wyatt in closer. I am trying to keep that disaster out of the way and you want to bring him in."

"Walt."

"Christ, Linda."

"Walt, I know you and every cop in the department have a vendetta going with this guy. But push it aside."

"Why?"

"Because we need him. He is the best body we have to put on her computer."

Sydowski said nothing.

"Walt, before I came to homicide he helped me on a case. He got us a lock on some suspects who were operating on-line. It took some time but he was good. He did stuff in the valley with some of the early testing of the FBI's Internet crime boys. Did you know that?"

Sydowski didn't know.

"Walt, you're an old bull. When you started investigating murders, state-of-the-art technology was a typewriter. It's a new millennium and this case is shaping up to be a backbreaker. We have to come at it hard from all sides. Maybe her computer will be a dead end but what the hell else have you got right now?"

Sydowski nodded to a car exiting a parking space on Montgomery. "Maybe I'll talk to Leo after we're done here."

The dark polished floors in the lobby of American Eagle Federated Insurance gleamed against the stainless steel desk where the receptionist sat. A silhouetted eagle, its wings outspread over the company name, graced the wall behind her.

"Can I help you?"

Sydowski told her who they were.

"I'll let Mr. Fairfield know you're here."

She did not smile and Sydowski could not decide if she was saddened by the murder of a company employee or indifferent. They waited near the sectional couch. Standing, staring at the landscape paintings, the palms in the floor planters. Turgeon was flipping through a glossy travel magazine featuring Peru and treks through the Andes on the cover when a tall man with distinguishing white hair, dressed in a well-cut charcoal suit, greeted them.

"Tim Fairfield," he shook Sydowski's hand warmly, then Turgeon's, before escorting them back to the elevator. Fairfield's face was etched with tiny lines.

"Didn't sleep much after your call, Inspector." The doors opened. Fairfield pushed the button for the tenth floor.

"We're the national headquarters, five hundred offices nationwide. I have nine hundred people in my division. Two hundred of them here. Iris was one of mine. I am ashamed to admit that I did not know her at all." Feeling the need to explain, he added. "I am on the road quite a bit."

"What can you tell us?" Turgeon said.

"I've gone through her personnel records. She was a fine employee. Six years with us. Perfect attendance. Never took a sick day. No complaints. Very shy."

"Anything on family?" Sydowski said.

"Afraid not."

The elevator doors opened on the tenth floor and Fairfield led them down a long, wide corridor.

"I did more checking on her policy. She had no other relatives. Her parents passed away when she was a child. We'll handle funeral arrangements, according to her wishes."

"What are they?" Turgeon was making notes.

"She had a plot down in Colman and wished to be interred there. We'll have a small service. We're still making arrangements."

"At her age -- she thought about a plot?" Turgeon shook her head.

"Many people who work for us do think about it."

"Any disturbing calls or behavior in reaction to her death?" Sydowski said.

"Just the press, wanting to know more about her. We've said we're not commenting. I've instructed all employees to refer press calls to me. I'm making a statement at a news conference this afternoon."

"We'd like to know in advance what you intend to say," Sydowski said.

"Of course." Fairfield extended his hand to a blue-carpeted ocean with scores of low-walled blue cubicles, people wearing telephone headsets, working at computers that hummed with their typing. "This is one of our major claims-processing areas. She worked on a far corner of this floor."

Fairfield led them to an empty work station. It was no different than others. It was isolated by several planters and a table with a printer, fax

machine and trays layered with documents. At the nearest cubicle Sydowski noticed a familiar-looking woman in her thirties. She was wearing a red sweater and doing a poor job of trying not to watch the detectives looking at Iris Wood's desk.

"Excuse me. Mr. Fairfield?" She approached them. "I'm Melanie Tate." She was dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "I'm Iris's supervisor. Jan's on her way in."

Fairfield introduced Sydowski and Turgeon, who were ready to interview her. They went across the claims-processing area into an empty conference room with dark-paneled walls, a large polished table, with nearly twenty cushioned high-backed chairs around it. Sydowski was relieved to see a tray of fresh coffee waiting for them. Fairfield left them alone with Tate. She sat, her eyes glistening in the quiet. After removing his jacket and helping himself to a cup of coffee, Sydowski switched on a portable tape recorder, tested it, opened his notebook, and began the interview.

"This is a nightmare," Tate said, "One day she is here working near me, then, my God. The papers, the news -- a wedding gown -- who would do this?"

Sydowski and Turgeon took it slow with Tate.

"We didn't know her at all, really. She was shy, mousy. She never went out for lunch or after work with us. Much of the time you didn't even know she was there. Do you know what happened?"

Sydowski said they were working on every possibility.

"It's just so horrible and frightening." Tate studied her crumpled tissue. "Guess her new boyfriend is taking it hard, huh?"

"Boyfriend?" Sydowski said.

"Yes, not long ago she told me she had this new guy living with her. Jack."

"She told you that."

"Yes."

"What's Jack's full name?"

"I don't know."

"You ever see her with him, or meet him?"

"No."

"You're sure though?"

"Yes. She told me once, something like, 'I have to get home to be with Jack.' Did you talk to him?"

"What else did she tell you about him?"

"Nothing. I was surprised and happy for her because it sounded like she finally had somebody, was coming out of her shell, you know?"

Tate was concerned that Iris was not getting the most out of her life.

"She just worked on her files, researching the latest information, preparing new agents on death claims, how to comfort our clients during times of tragedy, loss, and illness, and now this. My God, how horribly ironic,

how sad."

After half an hour, Sydowski and Turgeon passed Tate their cards.

Ten minutes later, Jan Jenkins arrived, accompanied by her husband. The detectives requested he wait outside as they interviewed. Jan was eight months pregnant and apologetic as she positioned herself into a chair.

"I am so sorry, I can't stop crying. I just don't know why this happened to such a gentle soul." Jenkins was in her twenties, upturned button nose, big eyes. Her chestnut hair was pulled into a pony tail and had a satin-like sheen. She had worked with Iris for about a year, after coming from Claims. And, as was often the case with many people immediately after a homicide, Jenkins mixed her tenses.

"Iris is really a sweet shy woman. Would not hurt a soul. I was always telling her that she would meet somebody."

"Did she have any boyfriends?"

"No. I don't think she even had any dates. She told me once she was so afraid to even approach guys, so self-conscious because she didn't know how to talk to them. Yet she wrote these beautiful guides on how to talk to grieving people."

"Didn't she recently start living with somebody, a man?"

Jenkins shook her head.

"Didn't she live with Jack?"

"Jack's her cat, if that's what you mean."

Sydowski and Turgeon looked at each other. Of course. They'd already met Jack.

Later, Turgeon went to Fairfield's twelfth-floor office to collect Iris Wood's personnel records while Sydowski went to her desk and sat in her chair.

It was a neat, well-kept work area. A desk calendar highlighted deadlines, her upcoming vacation time. A pleasant fragrance evocative of her apartment. The soaps and creams of her bathroom. He slipped on his bifocals and studied the titles of reference books on the right side, dictionary, thesaurus, *The Oxford Book of Death, Poems from the Greek, Epitaphs, Requiems, Comfort for the Living, Love and Death* and *Solace for the Bereaved.*

Sydowski pulled Iris Wood's snapshot from his pocket and looked into her face, then out at the sea of tedium in which she swam alone each day, living a quiet life of desperation.

In a matter of hours, he knew what she ate, what she wore, what she read, and that she was self-conscious about her feet. Despite several years, no one in her office knew her. They could not even distinguish between her cat and a boyfriend that never existed; between a life lived, or a life that never was.

He stared at Iris Wood.

Fear thou not; for I am with thee.

EIGHTEEN

Iris Wood *is walking and talking with another woman in a well-lit parking garage. Iris waves as they part, then uses her keychain remote to unlock her car. She gets in, buckles up, turns the ignition, backs out and drives off the SFSU campus safely.*

"Run it again," Sydowski said.

The grim-faced detectives, gathered at the Hall of Justice for a case status meeting and brainstorming session, had lost count of how many times Sydowski had rerun the university's security videotape.

It came from the cameras on level three of lot twenty near North State Drive. The university police had done superb work after the case broke. They had provided patrol logs, dispatch calls, a list of the students enrolled in the night astronomy course, and tips called in since the story became public.

On the night of the murder, sixteen people had attended the class, most of them women. The SFPD ran background on the students. No hits.

The videotape of Iris in the moments before her death was a solid piece of the puzzle, Lieutenant Gonzales said.

"Okay, Walt, so we've established a concrete foundation for narrowing the time she was last seen alive. The distance where we found her abandoned car is under a mile, which means she encountered her killer, or killers, a short time after her class. What do the campus cops have on recent unsolved sexual assaults, stalkings, and the like?"

"Nothing recent. Some burglaries in the neighboring residential area. The district is checking."

Gonzales planted an unlit cigar between his teeth. "So he grabs her there, near the Grove, on Crestlake. How? Through a ruse? Ted Bundy succeeded with that. Or, he drives up behind her? Somehow gets her to pull over? Maybe he was in the class, or another class and follows her, or disabled her car and followed her? How?"

An investigator from Crime Scene said they had checked her car. It was mechanically sound with two -thirds of a tank.

"So how then?" Gonzales pushed the group because he was being pushed from high places. "Can somebody tell me how he got her out of her car near Stern?" Gonzales was answered with silence, then said, "There were no witnesses. It was an isolated little area. We had fog. No tire marks. Crime Scene and the lab are still working on everything."

Gonzales nodded to the TV monitor frozen on the grainy image of Iris Wood entering her car.

"On the last night of her life, she leaves her office, goes to her apartment, fixes herself a low-cal pasta dinner, according to the autopsy. Drives to SFSU for her first astronomy course, then leaves. How does she go from that" -- Gonzales points his cigar at Iris Wood, alive on the videotape -- "to a mutilated corpse displayed in a wedding gown in a shop at Union Square?"

"Maybe she was on her way to visit a friend near Stern Grove," one detective said.

"No friends have stepped forward," Sydowski said. "We're still canvassing there with some help from the district. Zip so far."

"Maybe it was an affair, or some sort of illicit meeting," the detective said.

It was a good line, Sydowski thought. "We'll crosscheck the company policyholders and employee list with residential addresses for the area, and those with her university class."

They were checking parolees, complaints, any strange cult or underground stuff, beating the bushes for any rumors in the various sex trade communities.

Gonzales opened another file folder. "Toxicology results show no traces of alcohol, controlled substance, or medication, so no impairment. The Coroner's confirmed she was not sexually assaulted. No tearing, no semen, no blood, no transfer, no hairs. No DNA. But he mutilates her." He turned to Mike Boyd, the local coordinator for the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit. "Mike, what's your read so far?"

"It's early in the investigation. But given what we know about the scene, the highly ritualistic nature, it's definitely organized. Very planned, ceremonial, almost requiem-like. You've got to look at his victim selection, his likely use of a con to gain control. Control fits with his organization and planning. The mutilation likely has little to do with hampering her identification, because he left her car, her fingerprints. The display magnifies his desire to have her found, have the world know. He's fulfilling a fantasy. His annihilation of her face is his way of depersonalizing her. Could be he's physically disfigured himself, or suffering deep psychological wounding. He wants to amplify or signal his pain. Obliterating her face could be linked to his ritualistic behavior, which probably arises from a traumatic event involving women. Possibly this woman, or this 'type' of woman. He's likely done this before. Something inside him is raging. Possible anger that he's not been noticed. I agree with Inspector Sydowski, he'll likely do this again."

A couple of moments passed while everyone digested Boyd's preliminary take and the potential magnitude of the case. Detectives handling the bridal shop aspects told Gonzales that so far they had not found any link between Iris Wood and Forever & Ever, nor any association with the Carruthers woman whose wedding dress she was wearing at the time of her murder.

"Fine," Gonzales said, "so how did he manage to gain entry to the shop?

Did any security cameras from businesses in the area record anything?"

That was Ben Wyatt's assignment. Eyes went around the table. No Wyatt. Missing a status meeting was a dangerous thing. Sydowski clenched his teeth, glaring at Gonzales, who deflected Sydowski's heat.

"I'll catch up with Inspector Wyatt later," Gonzales said. "Walt, how did you do at her apartment?"

"Crime Scene said it was clean. Her computer could be significant. "Seems she spent a lot of time with on-line singles, chat rooms."

Karen Noletto, an FBI agent assisting on the case, noted that on-line dating had led to some tragic cases of cyber-stalking.

"Sure." Sydowski nodded. "I'd like some *expert* help on it to get into her stuff, see who she's been communicating with. The FBI is on top of this sort of thing."

"But you've got an expert on the case already."

"Who?" Sydowski said.

"Wyatt's the guy for that," Noletto said.

"And do you see him here? That guy can't even make the damn meetings. If you think for one second that I would trust him --"

Gonzales raised his hand. "Step back, Walter. I know Wyatt's got experience."

"He did a lot of work with our Computer Intrusion Squad in Hayward," Noletto said. "And IE stuff at Palo Alto, some early trial work with Carnivore."

"That computer surveillance thing?"

"Yes," Noletto said. "Did a lot of research on his own time. We assumed he was put on the case as your computer crimes person."

"We'll take your recommendation under advisement," Gonzales said, then began making assignments on the case.

The meeting was nearly over when Wyatt arrived.

"Case status meetings are a priority, Inspector," Gonzales said.

"I was checking something. Sorry."

"How did our guy gain entry without triggering the alarm?"

"I think it was from outside the system."

Sydowski shook his head. "We know most guys can bypass a system at the keypad. How exactly did our guy do it? If we knew, it might be a lead."

"Some kind of intrusion from outside. I still need more time to work on it. And I'd like to look at her computer, so we can determine the last sites she visited, the last people she communicated with."

"I'd like the FBI to look at her computer, Wyatt," Sydowski said. "I want you to check the cameras from the businesses nearby."

Gonzales stepped in. "We'll talk about this later. We're wrapped up until next time."

As the meeting broke up, the secretary from the homicide detail called from the door for Turgeon.

"Linda, a Penny Dumay here for you."

She was sitting in a chair in the reception area of the squad room, an attractive well-dressed twenty-something, twisting the straps of her purse, when Turgeon and Sydowski greeted her.

"Walt, Penny was the last person to see Iris. She's the one waving to her in the campus parking lot."

"Thanks for coming down, Penny," Sydowski said.

They moved to an interview room.

"You left town the morning after your class?" Turgeon said.

"Yes. I'm a flight attendant. Dallas to Miami and back. I hurried down here as soon as I got your message on my machine; then I connected it with the news reports. It's so terrible. We walked to our cars together just the other night."

"Yes, we're going to get your statement. But off the top, can you remember anything that stands out from the people in the class or the parking lot?"

"There's one thing, I thought about this on the way down, after I'd read the news reports, because I didn't see any mention of it."

"What's that?"

"When she drove off, a dark car drove off."

"Routine parking lot movement, maybe?"

"Not really. This car was parked in the shadows, at the edge of the lot."

"Wouldn't have showed up on our tape, Walt," Turgeon said.

"Remember a plate, or markings, color, anything, Penny?" Sydowski said.

"Nothing like that. It was dark."

"Big car? Small?"

"Not small. Midsize maybe."

"What about occupants?"

"One. Yes, only one. A man. He was looking in our direction, like he was waiting. I'm certain he was waiting."

"How can you be certain?"

"I heard him start his motor when Iris started hers. Then he followed her."

NINETEEN

South of Los Angeles in Santa Ana, on the edge of the old Civic Center Barrio, Maggie Nox finished sweeping the floor of a community hall.

Her steps echoed as she shut off every light, except the spotlight over the piano, an ancient upright Baldwin with a fancy carved walnut finish.

Maggie sat on the bench and began a soft ballad, the strains wafting in the dark, empty building. She was a community volunteer who came twice a week to clean the hall, which was used for meetings and the occasional wedding reception. Playing the piano after cleaning was Maggie's private reward. It had become a small pleasure in her life.

Tonight as she played, Maggie wondered if she had the courage to make a change. In the last year or so, she had begun to examine her situation. A shy self-conscious thirty-three-year-old who never went to college because she had stayed home to care for her sick mother, who died in her sleep a few years ago. Maggie was unmarried. She lived in a small apartment a few blocks away. Six days a week she took the bus to her job as a department store clerk in the Red Hills Mall east of Fifty-five. Every day was the same: old ladies complaining about shoes and underwear.

A noise. She stopped playing.

Had someone entered the building?

"Hello?" Maggie said to the darkness.

Nothing. She resumed her ballad.

Maggie was feeling increasingly restless about her life. Nearly a year ago, she had volunteered with an international emergency aid charity which told her about a two-year posting in Africa, teaching music in developing countries. Maggie was interested but the opportunity fell through after the agency's staff changed at its Los Angeles office.

Then an old high school friend offered her a job with a music store in Cleveland. Maggie was uncertain about moving, about changing anything in her humble existence. Maybe she needed to meet a guy?

She laughed at how she now had "virtual boyfriends" after she had read a cool story a few months ago in the *Register.* The article said shy people were meeting each other on-line. Some dated. Some even got married. Maggie decided to give it a try, figuring it was quite harmless if you were careful and didn't give out private information.

She stopped the music.

Sounded like a chair scraping.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Anybody there?"

Nothing.

Maggie shrugged. The old building was probably settling after last week's tiny trembler. Little aftershocks. Happened all the time. As she resumed playing, she reflected on some of the new friends she made on-line among the discussion groups, chat rooms, e-mail exchanges. It made her realize many people were living solitary lives, yearning for someone to talk to. Like that guy aching to change his life, the way he keeps asking if the right man came along would she forgive all the sins of his past life.

Maggie's heart went out to him and she had recently responded: *I could forgive all of his sins only if he could forgive mine.*

He had responded the other day: *You could be The One for me.*

Maggie froze.

The stage floor creaked. *That's close.* A curtain swayed at the edge of the darkness.

"This isn't funny."

Silence.

"Did you hear me?"

A switch-clicking like a tool or instrument being adjusted. Maggie swallowed.

Someone was definitely behind the curtain.

A car alarm next to the hall exploded with deafening whelping and horn honking. Then it sounded like a rear door of the hall thudding. Maggie hurried to the lights, hit them all. She went to the hall's side door. A handful of laughing young boys were a few feet away, gathered around a new car which looked a little too nice for the neighborhood. The loud alarm was causing a commotion. A Santa Ana police car appeared, lights flashing, screeched to a halt. Two officers stepped out, talked to a man in dark glasses who was having trouble shutting off the alarm. Maggie heard the stranger say: "It's a new rental, sorry."

One of the officers helped him kill the noise before the stranger got in and drove off.

His partner asked Maggie: "Everything all right in the hall there, ma'am?"

Maggie thought for a moment, then nodded.

Later, after locking up the hall, she walked home quicker than she usually did, wishing she had asked the police officers for a ride.

It was a warm night but Maggie couldn't stop the icy chills running up and down her spine. She was convinced someone had been in the hall.

Watching her from the darkness.

TWENTY

In the *San Francisco Star's* newsroom, Reed was putting the final touches on his short news article on Iris Wood's murder for the first edition.

He had some color from her landlord. *"What sort of monster would do this to such a gentle soul?"* He was a retired chemist. The *Star* took a nice photo of him holding Jack, Iris's cat outside her apartment.

Reed had a few quotes from the news conference at American Eagle Federated Insurance, where she had worked and where no one really knew her. But Tim Fairfield, the company executive handling press questions, refused to put it in those terms. *"We respected her privacy, as I hope you will respect ours."* He asked the press to refrain from pursuing American's employees for more information. *"They are coping as well as can be expected."*

Yeah, right. Judging from the calls Reed made into the place, much of the staff did not even know she existed. *"Iris who? What? That woman murdered in the bride shop worked for us?"* The switchboard was still putting calls through to her extension.

Reed had worked through lunch and got a bag of potato chips from the newsroom vending machine. His stomach was growling when he returned to his desk, opening his bag, reaching in for the first big chip when his phone rang.

"Reed."

"Just read your story," Brader said. "Tells me nothing I didn't already know."

Reed swiveled in his chair catching a glimpse of Brader in his glass-walled office at his computer, phone to his ear. Reed began crunching his chips, making a point of smacking his lips.

"You knew her cat's name was Jack? You knew she was a researcher who wrote bereavement guides? You knew all this but never told anyone? Have police talked to you? Because you're scaring me, Clyde." Reed reached for another chip. "What do you do in your spare time, when you're not clawing your way to the top?"

"I'm warning you, Reed. I want an exclusive in-depth profile for the weekend."

"I'm working on it as we speak." Reed continued crunching until Brader hung up.

Reed opened a soda, glad he never told Brader, or anyone, about his tip from Slim. Not at this point. He needed to develop it, verify it, parlay it. He had tried. Oh, how he tried. Working sources in traffic, California Highway

Patrol, the counties, feds like the FBI, DEA, the city, every law enforcement agency where he trusted somebody, carefully and delicately asking what they were hearing on the Stern Grove scene, if anyone had heard of any leads on how or why Iris Wood's car came to be there. He never once gave up his information, sniffing peripherally to see if anything out there substantiated Slim's story. Of course, Sydowski was the primary and the key. All day long Reed had tried in vain to reach him. Left messages on his phone in the Hall, on his cell phone. No response. As if on cue, Reed's line rang. Maybe it was Sydowski. *Come on, Walt.*

"Tom Reed," he answered like someone awaiting confirmation of a lottery win.

"It's me," his wife said.

"Oh. Hi."

"My voice bring you down, Tom?"

"Ann. No. Hi. No. I was just expecting another call."

"Well, are you going to ask me?"

"What? I'm sorry, what?"

"About Zach. I went to the specialist today, who sent us to another one."

"Yeah, I was going to call you. How did it go?" Reed's cell phone trilled. Damn. That could be Sydowski. "Ann, just wait, please, I got another call." Why did this always happen when he was talking to Ann? He answered the cell.

"Thomas," Reed recognized the voice of a justice source who always called him by that name.

"Hey, what did you find?"

"From the details you gave me, this Slim is real, right down to the tattoo and earring. He's one of ours. Small-time thief stealing for his monkey."

"Thanks."

The source gave Reed Slim's full name.

"So, you going to tell me what's up, Reed? Slim got himself jammed? You never told me anything more."

"No. At this point he could be a hero."

"Right."

"Leave him alone now."

"My plate's full with real trouble."

"Thanks."

Reed went back to Ann.

"So what did the doctor say?"

"He's having some kind of environmental reaction."

"Is it serious? Does he have to go into the hospital?"

"No, but --"

Reed's other line rang.

"Hang on, Ann."

It was a copy editor with a question on his story. "Tom, is the cat's name

really ‘Jack Jack’ or is that a typo?”

Reed called up his copy. “One Jack.”

“The cat’s name is One Jack?”

“Jack. The cat’s name is Jack.”

Reed went back to Ann.

“Trying to talk like this is ridiculous, Tom.”

“Ann, you know it’s deadline time.”

“We should talk at home. Are you going to be late tonight?”

“Well --” His cell phone rang. “Darn. Just a minute.”

Reed grabbed his phone.

“Reed, Sydowski.”

“Walt! I know you’re busy, but we should meet right away. I’ve come across something.”

“No time.”

“It’s on Wood.”

“Tom, tell me now.”

“A witness called me.”

“Witness to what?”

“We should meet.”

“I am not playing games with you, Reed.”

‘Walter, you told me to ‘stay with this one.’ Trust me, we should meet.”

“What’s this pertain to?”

“Stern Grove.”

Sydowski sighed. “I’ll be at the diner I go to in North Beach. One hour.”

“Thanks.”

Reed went to Ann who had heard Reed’s end of the conversation. “Try not to be late, Tom.”

TWENTY-ONE

The Oasis was slivered between a head-shop and mystic bookstore about mid-hill on a narrow North Beach side street around the block from where Sydowski's old man used to cut hair.

It had eight high-backed booths, twelve stools at the counter, and walls darkened by time. Its menu had changed little since the cook from a Greek freighter opened the place in the 1920s, passing it to his sons who passed it to their sons.

Guys who had built the Golden Gate had been regulars, along with blue-collar types who kept the city moving then and now.

Sydowski did not come here as much as he used to, but he liked it. The greasy smells alone were enough to take him back to when he was a kid, clutching the money his old man gave him on Saturdays to pick up cheeseburgers and french fries, rushing back to the barbershop where beat cops had dropped by. Usually, to provide the details that were absent from the latest crime stories reported in the *Examiner, Chronicle* and *Star.*

So long ago, Sydowski thought, sitting there in the back booth with his mushroom soup and slabs of garlic toast. They were good days. He was lucky to have Louise. He managed to call her today. She had gone to his house in the Parkside to check on his birds. "I know you're busy with your case, Walter. Tomorrow, I'll drive to Pacifica and pay your dad a little visit." Louise was an incredible woman. He had told her about his concern for Reggie Pope, the history with Wyatt, how Wyatt had joined the investigation. She had let him vent.

He finished eating and flipped through his notebook. They had scattered pieces of the case, like the stun gun, her face, a record of the last moment of her life with the university parking garage video, a witness glimpse of a shadowy man. Sydowski wet his finger and turned a page.

Maybe if he released more on her life, released the fraction they had and some of the circumstances, it might trigger a memory or give him the detail. Linda was already pushing a full submission to VICAP. But he wasn't convinced the FBI's system could do anything for him. At this point they'd only just begun to investigate. He'd kick things around with the other detectives in homicide, wait until he was done with the coroner and the crime lab, check with a California Justice Department analyst in Sacramento. No way did he want the big federal footprint on his core stuff now.

Sure, there was her computer. It couldn't be ruled out for leads. But he couldn't stomach the fact Leo wanted Wyatt to play with it. That's where Sydowski wanted the FBI and someone else in computer crimes. But

everyone was jammed right now. He held out little hope for Wyatt. Let the idiot play with it as long as the FBI and the others came to the rescue. Sydowski hadn't had much success on cases involving computers. He did not fully understand them. Just because she communicated on-line with possibly enough people to fill 3Com Park was an intangible as far as he was concerned. He would concentrate on the physical. The stuff you held in your hand, the tried-and-true that would hold up in court. He wanted a real victory, not a virtual one.

Iris Wood's funeral coming up. They'll send Wyatt there to surveil it with the photo unit. Maybe it would remind Wyatt of where he almost left Reggie.

"Jeez, Walt, you look like you want to tear somebody's head off," Reed said.

"I always feel that way when you're around."

"You bring out the best in me too, dear."

A swarthy unshaven man in a white apron materialized once Reed sat down.

"I fix you something to eat?"

"No. Wait. Yeah. Toasted BLT on white, fries with gravy, coleslaw."

The man banged through the tin swing door to the kitchen.

"I see you're still eating healthy." Sydowski sucked air through his teeth then began working a toothpick through them.

"Speaking of health, my job is ailing right now."

Sydowski's toothpick work held more interest for him.

"Walt, why didn't you let me know more after you found her car when I was at the Hall? The *Chronicle* had it. I got beat up on that. I was right there. You could have extended me the courtesy. After all we've been through together."

"Is that why you're here, inflicting yourself on me? How many times do I have to tell you, your career is not my concern." Sydowski made a point of looking at his watch. "Let's go. You said a witness called you."

"Got any suspects?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Everybody."

"Where have you been looking?"

"Reed I don't have time for this."

"Walt, how are you making out on the spot where she was stopped?"

"I'm getting very cranky. Get to it."

Reed's back was to the entrance of the restaurant. He took stock for any potential eavesdroppers, then lowered his voice.

"I'm going to give you some premium information but I want something in exchange."

"When do you *not* want something from me?"

"I want to trade my data for some solid exclusive stuff."

"How about I put you in an exclusive cell with exclusive meals and an exclusive cellmate to love you exclusively all night long?"

"After all we've been through together and this is the respect you show me."

"I'm very tired."

"So I have a deal?"

"What you have is a very grumpy old cop. Are you going to get to the point? Because I'm going home to see my birds."

"Okay, Walt. I got a call from a guy, out of the blue. I met him and he says he knows who killed her."

"And?"

"Says he was there at the Grove when her Focus was pulled over."

"And?"

"Says he saw an unmarked police car, the dash cherry spinning, make a stop on her. He says the cop gets out, talks to her, she walks back to his cruiser, he hits her or something, then drives off with her."

Sydowski's face did not betray so much as a tick but his gut began churning.

"So, not bad, huh, Walt?"

"It's nothing."

"Nothing?"

"He tell you this over the phone after it was in the papers?"

"After. But those details are not public."

"What's his name?"

"I'm protecting a source."

"Age? Race?"

"Forget it, Walt."

"Your guy get a plate number? Make on the car, color. Description of the driver? Hear a unit number over the radio?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Where did you meet this tipster?"

"I'm not ready to give that up yet."

"Anybody could claim like that. We get them all the time. Some come from the mother ship."

"I think this guy's real. I did some checking."

"Did you now? Can you place him at the location? What was he doing there?"

"Conducting business."

"What sort of business does he conduct at night? Would the SFPD know this guy?"

"Most likely."

"So if this guy is genuine, why didn't he come to us?"

"He's afraid the cop he saw will come after him, what with him being a

witness."

"And because of his business?"

"I suppose."

"Let me ask you something, hotshot. Ever dawn on you that the guy who called you might actually be involved and is using you to throw us off? We know that has happened in previous cases, don't we, Tom?"

"I took precautions."

"Like what, made him swear he was telling you the truth, raise his fingers in the Boy Scout salute?" Sydowski shook his head. "Tell me why your guy wants this out. What's his angle?"

"Protection. He's afraid."

"Of what?"

"The cop who killed her."

"The cop who *he says* killed her. Listen, maybe he's afraid of getting nailed and calls you to create this mystery cop diversion."

"But you're not ruling out that it could be a cop."

"I never said that."

"You're going to sit there and tell me to my face that given information from a witness who saw a law enforcement unit stop the car of Iris May Wood, you're ruling out a line of investigation that concerns checking with SFPD traffic, unmarked sector cars, patrol and unit logs, with California Highway Patrol, every federal agency in the Bay Area, city, state department and private firms, any department that conceivably could have made a stop there?"

"I never said that."

"Because one might suspect that you are protecting your own house, there, Walt."

Sydowski's eyes narrowed. "You'd be wise to be careful with your words. Did I not tell you off the top that we're looking at *everybody?"*

"Fine. We're on the same page."

"Then cut the crap. You tell anybody at all about your witness?"

"No."

"You going to write about it?"

"Just a matter of time."

"Reed."

"First, I'd like you to check it out."

"Hey, I don't work for you."

"Then you'll be checking it out after the *Star* publishes it, won't you?"

Sydowski's eyes lost all warmth as he brought his full size forward, moving his face to within inches of Reed's. "Are you attempting to exercise influence over a member of the San Francisco Police Department to sway the course of a homicide investigation for your gain and interest?"

Reed shook his head.

"Don't you ever try to pull that crap with me. Understand?"

"Look, it's just that the *Chronicle* scoop on the car hurt me, especially since I was with you at the Hall, and I'm really getting pressured from my new editor."

"So write a letter to Ann Landers. You're certain your caller didn't go to another news department?"

Before meeting with Sydowski, Reed managed to get a phone message to Slim, conveying that he had Slim's real name and picture to ensure his exclusivity and cooperation. *I ain't going anywhere. My life is in your hands, man. In your hands.* Reed had calmed Slim down, telling him that it all reinforced the fact he was telling the truth.

"I am certain my guy won't go elsewhere."

"You going to recommend he talk to us, or are we going to have spend more taxpayer money and find him the hard way?"

"I will work on getting him to talk to you."

"This is what I'll give you. The company where she worked is having a private funeral for her. I'll get the few friends she had to talk to you, so you can put out a story and I'll see if I can get you stuff no one else will have. Meanwhile, you get me this guy, or I will come after you."

"Done."

Reed's food arrived. He looked at his watch.

"Sorry," he told the man who brought it. "Can you pack it up to go, along with three pieces of that Boston cream pie, over there?"

"How are Ann and Zach doing?"

"Zach is dealing with some kind of allergy and Ann is dealing with me."

Sydowski shook his head. "God help both of them."

"How are your birds?"

"Fine."

"Your old man?"

"Fine."

"Your girlfriend?"

"Your food's ready."

Reed grabbed his brown takeout bag and waved.

Sydowski nodded a farewell, then ordered a piece of Boston cream pie for himself. Alone again, he flipped through his notes. The burglaries near Stern Grove on Crestlake would fit, making Reed's tip very, very plausible. He pulled out his cell phone to call the district and push for more information, then Linda to revisit traffic logs. After finishing the pie, he stepped into the street.

A cop. Jesus.

TWENTY-TWO

Sipping her morning tea at her keyboard, Olivia reviewed some of her exchanges with her new friends she'd met on-line.

The single mom in Detroit: *I thought I'd never fall in love again. I'd been hurt so many times, I stopped dating four years ago until I literally bumped into a guy at the bookstore. Now we're engaged. Never give up.*

Then a law student from Atlanta: *But it hurts so much when after one or two dates the men never call you again. If it is perfection they seek, then their search is futile. Better for me to get a dog and stay at home.*

That prompted Olivia to join in with some advice. *We all know the risk of rejection can put you in some awful situations. But you have got to take part in life. Time is too short to waste. I truly believe there is somebody out there who is right for you.*

The divorced young dad with two small girls in Los Angeles agreed: *Livinsf is right. Life has to be grabbed by the horns, you have to take control, don't wait for them to call you. Go out hunting, get some new clothes, change your hair, whatever it takes to bolster your confidence because, believe me, the guys are just as nervous as women are.*

Olivia found the on-line exchanges were helping her. They were safe, anonymous, heart-to-heart exchanges. Like having a diary that responds with a dozen different answers to her questions.

There were all types out there, breezy teens, college kids, burned-out, career-driven, hollow-hearted types, the loved, the lost, the dumped-on, and the man-hating poets and various mistresses of the dark. Then there were the shy boys, the geeks, the freaks, the perverts, and all-round nightmares, which she deleted; there were some honest-to-goodness nice men, at least they sounded nice in their messages, and then there were some unique types. Like the one guy who was so specific with the questions, as if conducting a personal sociological study or job interview: *What exactly do you look for in a man?*

Honesty, Olivia had responded.

At the store yesterday when she had gone on-line she found he had responded with a new question: *If you found the right man for you, could you forgive any sins in his past life?*

She waited until she got home before answering. She had given it some thought, answering it late last night before going to bed, writing: *Yes. I believe love can overcome any human failing.*

His new response arrived this morning: *You sincerely mean that? Because in my experience so many others have misled me. So please, livinsf,*

assure me now, is this empty rhetoric, or do you truly mean it when you say that if you found the right man your love would wash away the sins of his past life?"

Olivia looked at her watch. She wanted to answer but was running late for work. She started the shower, then returned to her keyboard. Hot water hissed and steam rose from the bathroom door as Olivia considered his newest question.

Yes, she had meant what she said. But this guy was a little deeper than her other friends. Must have some serious issues. What was he -- a convict? Olivia laughed to herself. "The sins of his past life." Seriously, maybe he had been terribly hurt by someone. Deeply wounded. Maybe she could help him? Olivia began typing. *Yes, I truly mean it from the bottom of my heart.*

Olivia had to go. She was running late.

Opening Caselli's, Olivia went through her routine. The morning went fast, she thought, catching herself in the mirror, checking her hair.

"Today, you're getting that fixed."

The transom bells jangled.

"I'm a little worried. They haven't arrested anybody, you know, Olivia," Mrs. Caselli unwrapped her shawl. "I've been talking to some of the other merchants. They say police are coming around to stores asking everybody questions." Mrs. Caselli's eyes twinkled. "So, Olivia, lunchtime. You going to meet somebody, today?"

"I have a hair appointment."

"That's nice. Very nice." She studied Olivia for a moment. "Something is different about you. I can't put my finger on it."

At the busy salon Olivia said, "Nothing drastic. Just a trim and a re-working of these bangs."

Her hairdresser placed one hand on his hip and fingered Olivia's bangs. "That's as bold as we're going to be today?"

"I think so."

Welcoming the din of the salon, Olivia felt a strange pang of guilt, as if she was part of a karmic universal adjustment. For she definitely felt a growing debt toward Iris Wood.

"Look," said her hairdresser, spinning her chair to the mirror when he'd finished, "we've found the real you in there."

Mrs. Caselli's eyes widened when she returned. "Olivia, you look very nice."

"It's just a haircut, Mrs. Caselli."

"I'm curious. Why are you doing this now? You meet somebody new, maybe?"

"Sort of."

A wrinkled hand, its palms as smooth as a baby's skin, patted Olivia's.

"Good, Olivia."

That afternoon Olivia assessed herself in the backroom mirror. Not too bad, she thought as the transom bells rang.

"Can I help you?" Olivia said to the man at the counter.

"Ben Wyatt, San Francisco Police." He showed her his ID. "I'm looking for the manager."

"You found her."

"I'm kind of rushed but we're asking businesses in the area if they would quickly let us see their security camera systems to determine if they could've possibly picked up anything recently."

"This is related to the bridal shop?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it late?"

"Well, some units record slowly for days."

Olivia led Wyatt to their system and its controls in the storage room. After several minutes, Wyatt saw that Caselli's cameras had not recorded anything of use to the investigation. Olivia volunteered some other tapes for him to take.

At the counter, Wyatt gave her a receipt for the tapes, made a few notes. They exchanged business cards.

"Did you know Iris Wood?" Wyatt asked.

"No. But I could check something for you." Olivia went to the store's delivery data bank, explaining the on-line delivery service to Wyatt. "Give me her birth date, I'll check if anyone sent her anything from us."

Impressed by her quick thinking, Wyatt gave her the information. He moved closer to her, studying the computer as she typed.

"Nothing. She's not in our system."

"That's pretty good detective work there," Wyatt looked at her card, then at her. "Olivia."

She blushed before his cell phone rang and he left.

That night at home, as Olivia ate, she reflected on meeting Inspector Ben Wyatt, his card propped on the vase of her table.

Seemed like a nice guy. Good looking too.

Later she went on-line to tell friends about her day, how she was inching out of her shell.

Go girl, one friend cheered from Tampa.

Nothing to fear, said another from San Diego.

Then Olivia remembered to check on her wounded, deep thinker; to see if he responded to her philosophy that love could wash away any sins of a past life.

That was a beautiful thing you wrote this morning. I don't think you'll have to wait much longer for the right man to come along. I think he's going to find you.

That was intriguing. Olivia wondered what had prompted that. *How do you know?*

He surprised her with a lightning-quick response.

Stay tuned.

TWENTY-THREE

Iris May Wood had been nine when she was rescued in the night from the blaze that engulfed her home and killed her mother and father.

A news photographer from the *Star* had been there in time for a shot of a firefighter carrying Iris from the burning house. Eyes wide with horror, barefoot in pajamas, hugging a stuffed teddy bear. Flames, smoke and sparks swirling to the stars, as people from the neighborhood watched her family burn.

Iris had been raised by her aunt and uncle, who were killed thirteen years later by a drunk driver. After college Iris got a researcher-writer position with American Eagle Federated Insurance. She had never married. No boyfriends. No relatives to mourn her as the moderately-priced oak casket purchased by her employer was lowered into the plot next to her parents. Of the tiny group who stood at her graveside, only three were not paid to be there: two women from her office and her landlord. The hired chaplain read a final passage that had been confidentially requested by Sydowski. The one from Isaiah, chapter forty-two.

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee."

Reed watched it all from a respectful distance, discreetly taking notes.

Sydowski was absent. So was Turgeon, leaving Reed to puzzle over Sydowski's cryptic interest in the bit of Scripture. Nothing made sense, Reed thought, catching the glint of metal reflecting the sun in the distance.

Ah, there it was.

Reed headed for the dark van parked in the distance. The invisible police surveillance unit, keeping tabs on the service in the remote chance the killer might wish to pay his respects. Some forty yards east of the van, Reed spotted a man in a dark suit and glasses standing near the corner of a mausoleum and approached him.

"Good afternoon, Inspector Wyatt."

"Hello, Reed."

"I haven't seen you since your partner got shot up."

"You know how time flies, Tom."

"Where you been?"

"Here and there."

"So you're on this too? What's the latest?"

"You tell me. You probably know more than I do."

Reed could not gauge his face under the dark glasses. "I doubt it. Seriously, anything new?"

Wyatt shook his head.

"I hear you guys are checking into some pretty familiar territory."

"Is that what you're hearing?"

"Yup."

"You've got very good ears."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they don't tell me anything. Sydowski's the primary. All roads of information flow and lead to the great one."

"I see. So how are you doing, Ben?"

"Fine. Listen, this is not the best place to catch up, so could you, like, take a hike?"

"Sure, but I want to stay up on this. I'm going to call you."

Over the next few days, Reed worked on his profile of Iris Wood. He argued with Sydowski about the exclusive tip on the cop.

"Walt, I am going to say a witness says he saw an officer in an unmarked car stop Iris Wood's car near Stern Grove, then drive away with her."

"If you do that now, you'll blow the case."

"You always say that."

"Have you not learned from your mistakes?"

"Tell me how I'll blow your case."

"We need more time."

"I'm not going to get beat on this?"

"Damnit, is that all you --"

"He came to me, Walt."

"Listen, you are way out in front on this."

"Is the tip good?"

"We haven't ruled it out but we need more time."

"Then I am going to use it --"

"Tom, if you hold off a bit, we can give you pictures."

"What kind of pictures?"

"Exclusive pictures."

"Describe them."

"Taken a few hours before death. The last time she was seen alive."

That sounded good.

"I'm coming over to the Hall to see them."

The grainy stills from the campus security cameras, dramatically enlarged, showed Iris getting into her car for the last time. Reed had accepted Sydowski's proposal. Sydowski also provided him with a time line and map detailing the final movements of Iris Wood's life.

Reed had interviewed some of her former college classmates, including Penny Dumay, the woman who walked to the campus parking lot with her. He

talked to the staff from Forever & Ever. He was given a brief tour of her apartment and the bridal shop with Turgeon as an escort, allowing him to produce a dramatic account of her life and her final hours.

Sydowski raised the specter of a serial killer and the ritualistic nature of Iris Wood's murder, releasing some details, holding back on most as he outlined the last hours in the life of a quiet, lonely office worker in downtown San Francisco.

Brader did not criticize Reed's piece.

"It's going Sunday, Reed," he said.

Reed was pleased. It was the *Star's* largest circulation day. His article would dominate front and spill into two clear inside pages filled with previously unpublished photographs and information. It was also the feature the paper planned to use to kick off its new redesigned Web site.

Reed never told Brader, or anyone for that matter, about his tip on the cop, figuring he had done well so far in his high-stakes poker game with Sydowski, a man he respected and trusted. He could go with the tip later, at the right moment when it would bust the story open in another direction.

Driving home Saturday, Reed thought of Ann and Zach. He had immersed himself so deeply in the story, he forgot they had plans for dinner at their favorite Mexican restaurant. He also thought about Zach's mystery reaction and wondered about allergies in his family tree. A horn blast yanked him back to his feature. He realized how well Sydowski had played him. All the information squeezed into tomorrow's story was not meant to inform Bay Area residents.

It was meant to challenge the killer.

Reed has just taken dictation for Sydowski's letter to the monster who murdered Iris Wood.

The eyes of a little girl rescued from a deadly fire, grainy photos from a security camera taken hours before her murder. The Scripture.

Sydowski must be convinced the killer was going to read his article.

TWENTY-FOUR

Eugene Vryke sat in the soft leather sofa of the large office of one of the country's top neurological specialists.

Vryke was awaiting the verdict on the series of tests the specialist had performed on his brain over the past few days. The doctor had kept his office lights low during his appointments. Vryke disliked bright rooms. He took comfort in the gurgling water of the hanging wall fountain. Its soft blue light was soothing as Vryke looked across Manhattan from thirty-nine stories.

The doctor entered, holding a clipboard, closing the door quietly behind him. He deposited himself slowly in the sofa beside Vryke and removed his glasses.

"There is no easy way to tell you what the tests show us." He looked at Vryke with compassion. His cushion made a leathery squeak as he positioned himself to deliver the news. He had a trace of a Swiss accent. "Given the rate of deterioration, advancing cell and membrane destruction, accelerated by each convulsive event, I fear --"

"How long?"

The specialist knew when a patient needed to be told point blank. "One month. Six weeks at most. It is an absolute. No treatment exists."

Vryke stared at the fountain.

"I am deeply sorry," the doctor said. "Perhaps I should give you a moment to collect your thoughts?"

Vryke did not respond.

"You must consider how you will inform your family."

"There is no one."

"A girlfriend, colleagues, business associates?"

"There is no one."

The specialist thought this case profoundly troubling, given that his new patient was in his early forties, possessed an exceptionally high IQ, and was otherwise in fine health. He flipped a page of the file. "I observed that you said the pills no longer help control the painful convulsions."

Vryke closed his eyes and nodded once.

"We have developed something for you more powerful to ease it." The doctor reached into the pocket of his white coat, retrieving a small rectangular plastic case. He opened it. It held several vials of clear fluid and a hypodermic needle with a pistol-styled handle and thumb mechanism. "This can be easily self-administered, as you have done previously in your history. At the advent of an episode, make an injection. The precise volume is noted on each container. You must not exceed it."

The specialist leaned forward touching his forefinger behind Vryke's ear on the point where his neck met his jaw. "Make the injection here," he said. "Relief should be instantaneous, but you must not exceed the prescribed maximum. To do so would prove immediately fatal. You understand my instructions?"

Vryke knew exactly what the doctor was telling him.

The older man offered a gentle smile and after they let a few moments pass, watching and listening to the fountain, he said, "Go now, my friend, and take care of the final things while there is still time."

Vryke slipped on his dark glasses and ball cap. Taking the elevator down, he decided to walk back to his hotel on West Sixty-Third Street by way of Central Park South. It was dusk. Sirens wailed amid the fading din of mid-town traffic as he lost himself in the park.

One month.

It confirmed the inevitable. He had met the New York specialist for the first time a few days ago after securing an emergency appointment. He would never see him again, as was the case with the doctor he had seen six months ago in Boston and the specialist nearly two years ago in Chicago. All three were leading neurological experts. All three had told him what he had suspected. His condition had nearly run its course.

Approaching the hotel, he took his usual precautions, slipping on gloves. He always wore hats and glasses, kept his head lowered from security cameras. He had been very careful while in New York. He never used the bathroom in his hotel room. He showered, brushed his teeth and shaved using the public facilities at the hotel pool. Citing allergies, he requested the linen in his room be changed daily and the carpet vacuumed in the morning and at night. He left no garbage in his trash. He ate at fast-food places, crowded restaurants, or on the street at hot dog stands. He had dozens of credit cards in dozens of names. He had charged this room to a Mr. Frederich H. Boller, using acquired account numbers belonging to a huge multinational corporation that used the hotel daily and would never question the expenses when they came thirty days later. Vryke knew that three different executives named Boller had used the hotel in the last nine months. All of Vryke's medical records in the New York doctor's system were under yet another assumed name, as they were with the other doctors. He would see to it that vital information would be changed in the clinic's data bank overnight without detection and that all tissue and blood samples would be automatically ordered destroyed. The file would vanish within days.

He left no trace. No one would remember him. He was a ghost.

Vryke entered his darkened hotel room. It was lit only by the screens of his laptop computers. He had built them himself.

He stood alone in the dark, statue-still, assessing his quest, reducing his breathing, his heart rate, letting the magnitude of his terminal condition take him to a higher plane of existence.

The clock was ticking.

This is a lost world awaiting a message.

Vryke was the messenger.

In the mystic visions arising from his painful episodes, it had been revealed. Vryke's purpose on earth was to emerge from his dark lonely chamber and enlighten the world before he left it.

In recent years it became increasingly clear to him that this was his fate as he reflected on his past. He had been rejected by his mother at birth, disfigured as a child, and cast into a life of solitude, never understanding, until recently, that it had all been preordained. It had all happened for a reason. He had been chosen to create an everlasting message for the world by finding the One True Heart who would wash away his sins, purify his soul, then accompany him into immortality.

One True Heart.

He had been searching for so long. At times he wondered if he was hunting effectively. Did she exist, or was she merely an ideal, a dream? That could never be. She *had* to be real. She *was* real. She *was* out there. It was his destiny to find her, to release her for the journey.

The last candidate had held so much potential. They had grown so close. *Before her betrayal.*

Vryke pulled on his latex gloves and sat before his computers. Two were connected to satellite phones with encryption devices he had built and small dishes positioned near the window where pigeons cooed on the sill. The third computer was connected to a powerful black box Vryke had built and set up between one of his systems and the hotel's switchboard.

He sat in silence before his machines, tapping his lip.

"The *San Francisco Star* newspaper, please," he said to one of his computers.

It beeped, then displayed the Web site of the *San Francisco Star.*

"Articles on Iris Wood, beginning with the most recent, please."

The computer beeped, then displayed Tom Reed's long feature on her life and unsolved murder at Forever & Ever. Her smiling face in the insurance office photograph staring at Vryke from the newspaper's Internet display. Vryke read the article, more interested in what police knew than the biographical aspects of her sad life. No one knew more about her than he did.

You're a liar, Iris. Excuse me, were, *a liar.*

I thought you were The One.

He had found Iris while he was lurking among the free and the commercial on-line lonely-hearts, dating, and matchmaker sites. She had also surfaced on one of the several dozen sites he had created and set out in cyberspace, like global drift nets.

Vryke's white-gloved fingers went to another computer and he entered a sequence. Words began to swim by. Screen after screen, saddening Vryke because Iris had held so much potential. Her file was all there as he quickly

reviewed excerpts of his interview process with her.

What do you look for in a man? he had asked.

Honesty.

That was a fine answer, just like the others. So he had engaged her.

Are a man's looks important to you?

Not really.

On that point, Vryke came back to her several times over several days from different angles to solidify her answer. It was consistent, so he took their relationship further, delicately encouraging her to open her heart to him.

Iris had, describing over time, and through self-deprecating humor, wit, intelligence, a life filled with low self-esteem, self-doubt, shyness, loneliness, and a yearning for someone to love.

You know, Iris had written, *it is sooooo good to have another shy heart to talk to. It's like having a best friend at the keyboard.*

Vryke nudged her to step out, join a club, talk to men.

Be brave. Be bold. Make your star shine.

Thank you, whoever you are.

Iris promised to take his advice, saying that it was time because, as she joked during one exchange, she was so pathetic she was telling colleagues in the office that she lived with a man named Jack, who in reality was her cat.

Can you believe that!?!? she had written.

Then, during a particularly heartfelt exchange, Iris revealed how she found comfort in the Bible, and had wept at the fear of possibly never having children; how she had fantasized about being like the beautiful brides on display in the wedding dress shop near her downtown office. How she sometimes had dreamed of the special day when she would enter it to select her gown.

Do you think it will ever happen for someone like me?

Sooner than you think. I am convinced you will meet somebody soon.

I can hardly wait!

Later, it had been time for him to ask a critical question.

Say, if you found the right man, could you forgive him the sins of his past life?

Yes. If he was truly sorry for them and loved me. And he would because he would be the right man.

You are certain you could find such capacity in your heart?

Yes.

At that Vryke believed he had found his One True Heart. He had moved Iris to the top of his list.

He grew anxious with anticipation, knowing the time for him to accept his fate had come. Vryke had commenced preparations, learning through his computers that Iris Wood lived in San Francisco, in a second-floor apartment in the Western Addition. He had obtained her home address, her telephone number, information about her job at American Eagle Federated Insurance,

her position, salary, desk location, extension and designated employee parking spot number. He knew she drove a Ford Focus. How much her car insurance and car payments were. Knew what she looked like, had obtained her photograph, her height, weight, hair and eye color, date of birth, shoe, dress, and bra size. He had access to her medical records, banking and credit card accounts. He knew where she shopped, what she ate, what movies she rented, and what size and type of pizza she ordered. He even knew what her cat ate and when it had last been examined by the vet.

In fact, given that she had confided her innermost feelings to him, there really was nothing Vryke did not know about Iris May Wood.

He knew she had enrolled in an astronomy course at SFSU. Knew the time and location of the first session, that she was nervous about driving that far south at night. He knew where she would park. He knew what time the course ended, knew the weather called for fog that evening. He had studied street maps and had researched the patrol patterns of the SFPD in the area.

Vryke had flown to San Francisco days in advance, checking into a cheap motel near the airport, to plan their meeting.

His intention was to keep her with him until he could complete their departure. But in her last message he found she had deceived him.

You know, on that forgiveness thing, I have to qualify it, because some sins can never be forgiven, they are just too painful to overcome.

He could not respond. This was a betrayal.

Liar.

She had probably been laughing at him.

Vryke's fingers typed and his large laptop screen had filled with the face of Iris May Wood. Clear. Crisp. Full color. She was moving. It was a recorded movie, its flickering lights alive, dancing across the scars carved deep into his face as he revisited the terror in Iris Wood's eyes. A section of silver duct tape covered her mouth. Wearing the Carruthers slipper satin ball gown. Her size. A nice fit. Bound to the heavy steel rods with their heavy metal bases. The curtain dropped in the display window of Forever & Ever. The security systems in the area put to sleep without so much as a blip at the master panels.

Vryke had done his homework.

There was nothing he did not know.

Then he had stepped into the frame, enshrouded head-to-toe in a hooded white bio-chem jumpsuit, complete with goggles, gloves and surgical mask.

He knew how she had dreamed of the special day she would come here for her gown. But she had lied, laughed at him, laughed at his face like all the others since his childhood. *You are not worthy to join me in eternity.*

He had gripped his scalpel.

Liar.

Vryke switched the movie off. He knew the ending. An icon on his screen said *Iris in San Francisco.* He dispatched it to the file that contained the others who had failed him.

He had to find his One True Heart.

He had narrowed his list.

Ah, the piano player. Averted disaster in Orange County. Could he risk returning to Santa Ana after such a close call so soon after Iris? The little gang bangers had interrupted him, forcing him to abort. Police spoke with him. It was too dangerous.

He tapped his lip. Now which one?

All of them strong candidates, all promising to wash away the sins of his past life. Like this one: *I truly mean it from the bottom of my heart.*

He had to choose. Time was running out.

TWENTY-FIVE

Wyatt watched the sun kiss the Pacific while waiting on the street outside of Iris Wood's building. He checked his wristwatch.

Where were they?

He'd been there for over an hour. Since he was assigned to this homicide, every cop he met had treated him with contempt. He didn't know how much more he could take. Maybe he should demand to be pulled from the file. Just head back to CFU. Let the homicide dicks play their games. Sydowski was determined to ignore his work. Wyatt looked both ways down the quiet street.

Sydowski and Turgeon were supposed to be here over an hour ago. Screw this. Wyatt began pressing numbers on his cell phone when an unmarked Caprice roared around the corner, squeaking to a halt in front of the house. Turgeon was by herself, slamming the door, face taut as they moved quickly along the walk.

"I got tied up."

"Save it, Turgeon. I know what's going on."

"What?" She stopped to eye him. "Hey, *I was tied up.* Don't get all paranoid on me. I am one of your satisfied customers, Wyatt. Or did you forget?"

He did forget.

"Fine," he said.

Turgeon fished out the key and they headed for the stairs to Iris Wood's apartment.

But along the way, Wyatt could not contain his frustration. "I can't understand why this has taken so long. Why Sydowski has practically ignored her computer."

"It's not like that."

"No? Sure looks that way to me. I chalk it up to the fact your partner loathes me. Because unless he's got something up his sleeve, something you guys are holding back, I can't figure out why he is overlooking a cyber-stalking line of investigation."

"We're not overlooking it."

They crested the stairs to the apartment.

"We should have been all over it from the beginning, Linda."

Turgeon had to bite her tongue because she agreed with Wyatt, but respected Sydowski.

"We're still at the beginning, Ben. Now you're investigating for any cyber angle." Turgeon unlocked the apartment and pushed the door open. "It's all yours."

Wyatt went directly to the computer, set down his briefcase, and switched on the machine.

"I've already poked around on it a bit," Turgeon said. "Enough to guess that she spent a lot of time on-line, has hundreds of bookmarked sites for dating, singles chat groups, matchmakers, lonely-hearts clubs, advice stuff. You name it."

"You know the last sites she visited?"

"Booksellers, I think."

"Her last e-mails? Sent or received?"

"Nope."

"I'll see what I can find out."

The keyboard clicked. In seconds Wyatt was into another realm of Iris Wood's machine, reading the technical properties of her system that appeared on her monitor.

Turgeon was impressed but she had to leave. She told Wyatt that Crime Scene had cleared the apartment, that Leo had cleared Wyatt to seize Wood's computer here.

"The landlord's pretty broken up. Went to Key West to see his sister. The other tenant's in Europe. You're alone here. We put Jack, her cat, in a shelter until the landlord returns. He may take him. Call me and Sydowski when you're done. Okay?"

Wyatt was absorbed in his work. He did not answer and did not hear Turgeon go.

He fired up his own laptop, connecting it to another cell phone he had in his briefcase. He removed his shoulder holster, draping it over the chair, and worked. He scanned Iris Wood's specifications, then inserted a specially designed diagnostic disk into her computer and began a quick series of checks, typing certain data he pulled from her computer into his laptop.

Soon he had her passwords and usernames, *IW02* was a favorite for the various on-line clubs she had joined. Wyatt started working on the sites which Iris had visited most recently.

Careful to use his police laptop, he signed on to a number of them and began reading the message boards, studying their content, tone, trolling for clues about Iris. Wyatt was cautious. Waiting until he found a site where someone mentioned *IWO2.* A so-called lonely-heart from San Antonio was asking if anyone had heard from her lately.

Wyatt made a note to watch that site, then moved on to begin trolling the scores of others, knowing it could be futile. *What exactly am I looking for?* He didn't know. Nothing surfaced that indicated she had been lured to a meeting. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack without knowing what the needle looked like. And it turned out that Iris used many sites, varying her user name on each one. *She must have spent all of her free time on-line.*

There were things he could try, but it was going to take a lot of work and a lot of time. For now, he inserted another disk, which would take several

minutes to do its work. As it softly hummed and whirred, Wyatt left the computer to explore the apartment, discerning the desperation of a lonely life, something he had come to know firsthand.

He recognized it in the longings of the on-line groups Iris Wood had joined. Hell, he was no different. He had tried a few himself. Everybody's looking for somebody. But he could never seem to find the right person, and spent much of his time staring at the city lights from his apartment, or watching old Bogart movies, or driving San Francisco's streets searching for answers to the shooting. Searching for salvation. Searching for someone to know the truth. That he didn't fail his partner. That he was a good cop. Searching for someone to understand that in a heartbeat people can face a life-defining moment and must make a decision, and that they will be judged by that decision.

I made my decision.

The shooter had taken a kid hostage on the stairs. There was a kid. I saw his eyes. I could not fire.

He longed to tell somebody who would just listen to the truth. Instead he ended each day as it began, a prisoner in his empty apartment, living an empty life. Facing nothing with nothing. Some days it seemed so futile. Maybe he was just tired. They had him running all over the place chasing nickel-and dime-stuff. Wyatt was standing in Iris Wood's bedroom staring at the twinkling city lights. He shoved his hands in his pockets, suddenly feeling the business card from one of the shops he had visited near the murder scene.

He retrieved the card, staring at it. It was from Caselli's, the little gift shop on Maiden near Union Square. *Manager, Olivia Grant.* He remembered how she seemed like a nice person. So quick to help him and smart, punching up Iris Wood on her computerized client list. Running a name like a cop would, inviting him to stand near her while they searched. When was the last time he had been *that* close to a woman? Ms. Grant was not wearing any rings. Kind eyes, a warm smile. Made him feel comfortable. He turned her card over, to her neatly penned home number. Maybe, he could call --

A muffled thud sounded from downstairs.

Wyatt held his breath and pricked up his ears.

Turgeon said he was alone. He expected no one.

Another sound. A creak. Drawing near fast.

The second floor.

Wyatt's gun was in the living room, in his holster draped on the chair near the computer. It seemed like such a long way.

Someone was approaching the apartment. Wyatt moved to his gun. The door handle was turning.

In a heartbeat.

He reached his gun. The door opened to Sydowski, glaring at him, eyeing his gun, in his right hand, lowered next to Wyatt's leg, barrel pointed at the floor, thumb on the safety.

"Put that away, Wyatt."

"You could have called, or at least knocked."

"Why, so you could bake a cake?"

Wyatt holstered his gun.

"Sit down and listen, Wyatt, because I don't wish to be in your company any longer than necessary."

"I'll stand."

"We're still maintaining cemetery surveillance. Your next shift is tomorrow morning."

"But I'm working on her computer."

"You want off this case, Wyatt?"

"No. I think you should let me finish what I am trained to do."

"Oh, and what's that?"

"This." Wyatt indicated the computers.

"Well, have you found anything, Inspector?"

"Not yet, I just got started. But she's been all over the Web, talking to everybody."

"Talking to people? Well this visit was worth my time. That's why I dropped by. To see a *real cop finding real evidence."*

"What century are you in, Walt? What city are you in? Take a look around. You know cyber-stalking is real. You know on-line murder is real."

"I know what's real." Sydowski invaded Wyatt's space. *"The bullet in Reggie Pope is real."*

"That's what this is all about, isn't it? It's all about me and Reggie. Nothing I do will ever be right by you."

"You're getting warm."

"You're letting your emotions cloud your judgement. This is dangerous for the case."

Sydowski stabbed his forefinger into Wyatt's chest. "Some things can't be forgiven."

Wyatt said nothing.

Sydowski's face remained tense; then he left.

Wyatt stood alone in Iris Wood's apartment, thinking of nothing, listening to Sydowski descend the stairs, leave the building, then drive off.

It was late but Wyatt was in no hurry. No one was waiting for him. His eyes inventoried the living room when he realized the disk he had inserted into Iris Wood's computer had completed its initial check. Wyatt typed a command.

A message appeared on the screen.

Cannot read from drive A:

Christ. What the hell? It was a new updated disk. This had never happened before. Wyatt tried a few commands.

A is not accessible. The device is not ready.

He tried something else.

Serious disk error writing to drive A:
This was not good.
Disk has been formatted.
What the hell?
Somehow, his most powerful disk had just been destroyed.

TWENTY-SIX

Reed entered the *San Francisco Star* newsroom a little after eleven A.M. The news receptionist spotted him flipping through a back issue near the front desk.

"Tom, some guy's been calling for you every half hour. Wouldn't go to your voice mail and said your cell phone was off."

"It's charging. He leave a name?"

"No. It sounded urgent. He said he'll keep calling."

"Okay, thanks."

Reed threaded his way through the metro news section to his desk with one thought on his mind. Coffee. He felt the stirrings of a headache from his lack of caffeine. The upside: No sign of Brader.

Reed's phone rang as he loosened his tie, pulled off his jacket, then grabbed the call.

"Tom Reed."

"I trusted you, asshole."

"Is this a radio contest?"

"You know who I am?"

"Afraid I need a clue."

"Slim. As in witness."

"Slim! Man. I'm sorry. What's up?"

"What's up? You gave me up, asshole."

"Time out there, pal, because I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You gave me up."

"I didn't."

"Then how come I just spent the last forty-eight hours as a guest of the SFPD. I'm a dead man thanks to you."

"I did not give you up. I took your information to them, *like you wanted.* Sure, they wanted to meet you but I didn't give you up."

Silence.

"So, Slim, tell me what happened."

"When we finished in Golden Gate, I went back to Stern Grove. Replaced the jewels I boosted. Clean. But like the next day, at the auto-body shop at my day job, two detectives, a pretty woman and a big mean-mother old guy, show up, take me away quietly. They got paper to go through my stuff at work at the halfway house. Got their evidence people going through my stuff. Kept pumping me on what was I doing at Stern Grove at that time. Told me it was no use lying because they had me and were sending me back inside if I didn't cooperate."

"What did you do?"

"Told them the truth, which is what I told you. That I saw a cop stop her car."

"What did they say?"

"Asked me for details, describe the cop, the car, her, what happened. They kept going over and over exactly what I saw, repeating details."

"Did they try to put the murder on you, say they had you at the bridal shop, anything like that?"

"No."

"Where are you now?"

"Pay phone around the block from my job. They let me go and told my boss and my parole officer I was helping them on a major case, like everything was cool."

"Then that's a good thing," Reed said, adding, "I never gave you up."

"Then how did they know?"

"Probably saw you take the jewels back. They've likely been surveilling and canvassing the area where they found the car. Probably ran a routine check on all area burglaries. Anyway, you're okay."

"How do you figure that?"

"They told your boss you were helping them with a case. They cut you loose. You're not a suspect. You're a hero."

"Soon to be dead."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because the killer is still out there and I saw him."

"It's time to write about you. No one will touch you then."

"Right, tell that to Lee Harvey Oswald," Slim laughed. "I'm just a small-time addict."

"I got to write about you."

Slim was silent.

"I did not give you up."

Slim was thinking.

"Your boss and parole officer already know you're helping the police. A news story is insurance for you, which is why you came to me in the first place."

"No names, no pictures, no burglary details. I am just a witness who was there that night, Reed."

"Deal."

Slim hung up.

Reed turned to see Brader standing two feet from him, tie loosened, sleeves rolled up, hands on his hips. He'd been listening.

"Mind telling me what deals you're brokering there, superstar?"

Reed swallowed, thinking fast, head throbbing from lack of coffee.

"Oh, that was just some nut case. Claims the CIA and some militia groups are behind the bride shop murder."

Brader stood there, obviously not buying Reed's explanation. "Really. Bet it's funny then."

"A real knee-slapper."

"Then let me hear your tape."

"My tape?" Reed reached for his recorder. "Sure." He pushed EJECT, then dropped the machine. "Darn it. Just a sec." He bent over, swiftly hooking a finger around the ribbon of tape. "Darn. I'm all thumbs." Some two feet of the tape unwound, got tangled and snapped. "Oh, I am such a dope of a reporter."

Brader stomped off, hurling an order over his shoulder. "I've got you down today for a news exclusive on the bride case, Reed. Deliver, or you're covering the dog show this weekend!"

Reed left the newspaper for the Hall of Justice.

Sydowski emerged from the homicide detail. "Let's grab a coffee, Tom."

They were alone in the elevator.

"I am going to write a story that says a witness told investigators on the Wood homicide that he saw an unmarked police car stop her, then vanish with her."

"Sounds like a good story."

Reed was surprised. He had expected friction.

"We don't think it was a cop. Believe me, we have done some deep checking and cannot verify exactly what the witness saw."

"Can you place the witness there?"

"Yes, but we cannot verify what he says he saw."

"Someone posing as a cop?"

"It happens, but again, we've got nothing."

They headed for the cafeteria.

"Are you still investigating his report?"

"Certainly."

"Will you release the witness's name?"

"Absolutely not."

Sydowski paid for two coffees and they sat at an isolated table. Reed loaded his with sugar and cream. "Guess now that you talked to Slim, my story won't hurt your case?"

"Depends what you write."

"How did you grab him?"

Sydowski sipped his coffee. "This is not to be published."

"Sure."

"Because of his drug problems, he was sloppy with his burglaries near Stern and St. Francis Wood. He was busier than he led you to believe. Left prints at the house closest to where she was stopped. He was an easy pick up. We recovered most of the stuff. We'll talk to the DA because what he saw is a

link. He's not getting a medal, but we're sorting things out."

"He's scared to death, convinced it's a cop."

"He's a drug addict and a thief." Sydowski downed the remainder of his coffee. "I got to go."

Returning to the *Star,* Reed was taking stock of what he knew of the case. A ritualistic murder of a single downtown office worker who barely existed beyond her little world; a drug-addicted thief on parole who claimed he witnessed a cop abduct her in the hours before her death.

A cop?

Ascending the elevator to the newsroom, Reed thought Sydowski's reaction to the cop theory was not right. If they truly thought it was a cop, Walt would be enraged. But someone posing as a cop? Reed shook his head. What did it matter? A killer was a killer. One thing Reed was convinced of, this crime was so *choreographed,* that Iris Wood couldn't be his first victim.

And if they didn't catch him, she wouldn't be his last.

Stepping off the elevator, Reed nearly bumped into his wife.

"Ann?"

"Hi. Had a coffee meeting near here with a client and thought I'd drop in. Can I buy you lunch?"

Reed saw the time on the clock in the reception area, then studied his wife. Her short chestnut hair was pulled up into an attractive bun. She was wearing a lilac designer suit, with a pleated-front skirt, a pearl necklace which worked well with the jacket's V-neck. She wore little make-up. She didn't need it. Her full lips and sculptured cheeks set off her brown eyes, as she stood before him, gripping her slim briefcase. He knew that lately they'd had so little time alone together, that Zach's sickness was worrying them, especially Ann because her sister had scores of allergies. Seeing her standing there, so beautiful, knowing that she was too good for him, made it easy to set his murder story aside for an hour.

"Let's go."

She smiled.

They went to a crowded little trendy place a few blocks away. Ann ordered a salad. Reed found the thing that passed for a burger platter.

"Tom, I'm worried about Zach." Ann produced a small file from her briefcase. "I talked to the allergist, again. She faxed me some forms and questions this morning."

"What do they figure it is?"

"They don't know. He is reacting to something." She opened the file, studied it, twisting her wedding rings. "His diet hasn't changed. She said it could be anything but is leaning to something environmental."

"We renovated the house, including his room."

"I told her. She said that it could be something in the material."

"Like what?"

"She doesn't know. She said we have to find out what's new in the house. Tom, how do we do that?" Ann handed the file to him.

"Well, we call the contractors and get a list of everything they used, from the wood, the material, the paint, everything. We break it down and provide it to her. Maybe it's the type of wood, paint, or something in the flooring."

A cell phone trilled softly in Ann's briefcase and she reached for it. "Sorry," she blinked at him. "This is Ann," she said into the phone.

Reed looked over his son's medical file. What was making Zach sick? He spotted the server coming from the kitchen with their order.

"No, no. That's too much," Ann said to her phone, then after listening, "They are?" The server set their orders down. "I'll be right there." Ann ended her call. "I'm so sorry," she said to the young woman serving them, "could you make the salad to go?"

"Not a problem."

Reed tried to flatten the two-inch thick slices of bread keeping him from his burger while Ann stood and pecked his cheek, then tapped the file.

"I'm sorry. I have to run," she said. "Crisis with a supplier trying to double an order. Tom, you take the file and, please, can you call the contractors, and get the material? Please?"

He worked his mouth around his burger, nodding to her.

When Reed returned to the newsroom, he set Zach's file down, listening to Molly Wilson, bracelets chiming as she typed at her work station next to his.

"Brader's been looking for you, cowboy."

"He can't seem to function without poking me with a stick." Reed was exhausted, pulling off his jacket.

"He wants to be sure you have a good story today on our bridal shop of horrors."

"I do. What are you doing?"

"A feature that is sort of a follow to your big take on Iris Wood. On-line dating, that sort of thing. Keys off her lonely life and some recent studies about love on-line. A little edge but not much. How about you?"

"A witness told homicide he saw a cop in an unmarked car stop Iris Wood near Stern Grove where they found her abandoned Ford."

"I like that! That's hard. All ours?"

"All ours."

"Should keep Brader happy."

"Nothing would keep him happy. He's nuts."

"I almost forgot." Wilson stood. "Remember Lou Del Grachi from the *Daily News* in New York?"

"Met him in Montana on that story in the Rockies. Seemed like a real sharp guy. What about him?"

"Oh, he's very good. He called today. Wants to talk to you. So call him."

Wilson's bracelets clinked as she flipped through the pages of her notebook, then tore out a page. "Here's his direct line." She glanced at her watch. "He should still be there."

Reed studied the number. "He say what it was about?"

"Said there might be a New York link to our bride-in-the-window murder."

TWENTY-SEVEN

Olivia made a breakfast of mixed fresh fruit, whole-wheat toast, and tea. As she ate, she fetched the long article she had saved a few days ago from the *San Francisco Star,* the one on the life of Iris Wood. She read every word and again her eyes glistened. Poor Iris. Olivia's heart ached for her, looking at the pictures. One of the photographs accompanying the article was taken at her funeral. The caption listed the cemetery in Colma. Olivia called the office there and obtained Iris Wood's plot location, writing the details down on the border of the news article. She went upstairs to her computer, went on-line and printed off a map. Quickly, she logged on to a few of the chat sites she had visited the previous night for responses and made some updates. She showered, applied some make-up, then dressed in a dark navy skirt and jacket. Then she collected some flowers from her garden, her map, got into her bronze Saturn, slipped on dark glasses and headed for San Jose Ave. She preferred it to the busy interstate.

Driving south, Olivia attempted to sort out her feelings. It was confusing, maybe it would be better once she arrived. She needed to perform a solemn duty as much for herself as for the dead stranger she mourned.

Goodness, look what I am doing.

Olivia surveyed the city flowing by her window. She had left her house, broken from her routine. Got her hair fixed, was actually having conversations with other human beings. Her on-line friends had helped her step into life, talk to people, take a chance with her heart. She'd come a long way from her dark night on the Golden Gate. Olivia pushed the memory from her mind, brushing the tears from her cheeks as she entered Colma.

Most Bay Area residents were familiar with the little town at San Francisco's southern edge. It had at least ten cemeteries located side by side, covering a mile-wide expanse that stretched nearly two miles.

Following her map and directions, Olivia found the cemetery. Using the Hillside entrance she located the section and the grave of Iris May Wood. She parked in the shade of a eucalyptus tree, stepped out, surveyed the area, collected her thoughts, smoothed her skirt.

Why have I come?

It was a beautiful spot. Some gulls cried overhead. The traffic sounds were a distant low hum, like a church organ softly reminding you that life does continue.

Olivia gazed at Iris Wood's grave, its fresh mound some thirty yards away. She breathed deeply, exhaled, then collected her flowers from the car and started toward it, the soft grass swishing under her dark dress shoes. No

stone marked the spot. The brown slopes of San Bruno Mountain ascended a quarter mile into the sky in the hazy distance.

A memorial wreath of white roses from her coworkers rested on the mound. A silk banner read: ALWAYS IN OUR HEARTS.

Olivia bent her knees and placed her vase near the wreath, neatly arranging the flowers that had shifted, realizing that she was gently weeping.

I don't know exactly what I want to say, only that I knew I had to come. We never met, but I think we knew each other because I think we fought the same fears, endured the same pain, dreamed the same dreams, and lived the same desperate lives, up until the day they found you. Olivia touched her fingers to the flowers, gently caressing them. *Maybe we were star-crossed, I don't know. But we both have left those lives now, and I believe in my heart that your death somehow lit the way for me. I'll never forget you, Iris May Wood.*

Olivia brushed a tear from her cheek, arranged her flowers, then left. The gulls shrieked as she walked toward her car, stopping to sit on a wrought-iron bench under the eucalyptus, and reflect.

She remained there a long time, enjoying the serenity. Coming here felt right, it helped her understand that she had a kinship with Iris Wood, who in death had played some cosmic role in saving her life. She had come not only to pay her respects, but, in her own way, to thank her.

Olivia stood to leave but held her breath.

A man was standing next to her car.

She didn't hear him approach. Standing there, hands in his pockets, looking at San Bruno Mountain. Olivia saw some vehicles in the distance. If she needed help, would they hear? She swallowed, then headed to her car.

The man faced her when she neared. Dark suit, no tie. Ray Bans. Late thirties. About six feet, solid build. He looked --

"Ms. Grant?"

He knew her? His voice was familiar.

"Yes?"

"Ben Wyatt. San Francisco police. We met the other day in your shop." He removed his glasses.

"Oh yes. Hello."

They shook hands, his large strong hand swallowed hers comfortably.

"Forgive me," he said. "I didn't mean to alarm you."

"You have more questions?"

"Yes, sort of."

"Here? I'm a little curious, well, a lot actually, how did you find me?"

He indicated a van nearly fifty yards away barely visible between some shrubs and large stones. "We've been working with local police, kind of keeping an eye out, watching who comes and goes, in case someone we haven't interviewed surfaces."

Olivia nodded.

"Think I could talk to you a minute? My shift is nearly over and there's a diner not far from here. Won't take long. I'm sorry to impose."

"No. It's fine."

"Good. Just follow my vehicle." He raised an arm, signaling his goodbye to the van. Then he walked to his car, an unmarked Chevy sedan, parked close but out of sight behind a small mausoleum. Olivia had not even noticed it there, she thought as she followed him out of the cemetery.

It was a new cozy place on Serramonte Boulevard. They slipped into a booth. She ordered tea. He took a coffee. Black. Wyatt placed his notebook on the Formica table top but did not open it, twirling it slowly, thinking how best to break the ice here.

"I was a little surprised when I saw you arrive Ms. Grant --"

"You can call me Olivia."

He returned her little nervous smile. "Olivia. Ben. I was surprised when I saw you out there because the other day you told me you did not know her at all." He opened his notebook. "I'm sorry, I have to note this."

"No problem," Olivia dripped cream into her tea. "That's right. I never met her. But after I read the story about her life, and the fact I pass by the bride shop every day…It's so close and the more I thought about it, the more I felt connected. It's like *I knew her.* You know, it's all so sad, and it just made me take stock of my own life, and well…" She waved a hand.

"Are you married?"

Olivia blushed. Smiled. Shook her head.

"Boyfriend?"

"No."

"Life partner?"

"That's not my orientation," she said over the brim of her cup. "This part of the investigation?"

He was making notes, nodding.

"Actually, it is. I never asked you in your shop and because you visited the cemetery, it's required." He yawned. "Excuse me, I was up very late the past few days going through her --" He stopped himself. "I'm just a little tired."

"The whole thing is such a tragedy. There must be a lot of work to do. Can you say if the police have any idea who did it?"

"I wouldn't know, the lead detectives keep everything pretty tight. I just complete the assignments as requested, and there are many."

"Well, Ben, I hope you can get some rest."

He nodded, gulping his coffee.

"What about you?" she asked. "Married? Got a girlfriend?"

He shook his head.

"Boyfriend?"

"Not my orientation," he said, checking his watch, finishing his coffee. "I should go. Sorry for the imposition, Olivia. You're the only person who

dropped by on my watch. I have to put it in the file."

"It's okay."

Olivia liked him. He sounded kind. Very nice eyes.

He closed his notebook, left a few dollars on the table, and stood. "Know your way back to the city from here? You can take El Camino Real, or back on Hillside. I'm heading back and could lead you out."

"I'm fine." She smiled over her tea. "Got my map."

Slipping his notebook into his jacket, he hesitated. "Can I ask you a personal question, Olivia?"

She laughed softly. "Why not? You've already asked a few."

"For me, I mean. Well," he said, "would you like to have coffee with me sometime when I'm off duty?'

"You're asking me for a date?"

"No. Just coffee."

"We're sort of having coffee."

"I guess I'm asking for a date. Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to --"

"I'd love to go on a date, Ben."

"Good." He smiled then his cell rang. He shook her hand. "I'll call you, Olivia, I've got your numbers."

"All right," she said.

He waved to her from the parking lot before driving off.

Olivia ordered another tea and sat alone in the diner, in the heart of Colma, a city where the dead outnumbered the living, where she had come to bid farewell to a life she had buried. Now, she had a date. Just as one of her on-line friends had predicted.

I don't think you'll have to wait for the right man much longer.

Really? Why?

He'll find you.

How do you know?

It's destined."

A shiver shuddered through Olivia. She sat there a long time, trying to make sense of her life, Iris Wood's death, and the flowers she placed on her grave on this heartbreakingly beautiful day.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Eugene Vryke's fingertips were tingling.

He was racing against his own death, peering into the night from the belly of a 737. The jetliner had just completed its climb and was levelling off. Below, the lights of cities and towns sweeping by like glittering rivers of the night.

The seat beside Vryke was empty. In the seat next to it, a small woman in her eighties was asleep. Behind Vryke, a teenaged university student was listening to a portable CD player, soft rhythmic ticking leaking from her headphones.

The time left on Vryke's life was evaporating. He could feel each second, each minute, peeling down to his heart as he struggled to complete his monument. His message through which the world would forever know his true identity and secure his place in history.

Time to review.

Vryke switched on his laptop.

The file came to life with her face. He had studied it over and over for hours. So many files, so many days. The top candidates he had interviewed were impressive. Qualified. It was a difficult choice. But he had to make his decision. Was he absolutely certain about her?

Yes.

It had taken him all of his life to reach this point. To understand his fate. To embrace it.

Such a long journey.

Eugene Vryke let his head sink into the pillow of his headrest, rubbing his fingers over his face, over the scars, cut deep into his skin as if a misshapen spider's web had been branded into it.

At that instant a razor sharp wild current sizzled through his brain delivering pain that knifed down his spine to his toes, slamming his heart against his ribcage, forcing Vryke to clench his jaw, slam his knees together, and grip his armrests.

Not now. Please not now.

It passed.

He prayed he had not screamed out like the other times. He had conditioned himself to suffer in silence. He took deep breaths, blinking rapidly. No one came. His heart rate slowed, his fingers brushed his medical bag, assuring him. An injection was not needed at this time, but it was within reach. In the calming, soft light of his section of the cabin, Vryke's brain patterns swirled and he became that sad boy again, lost in the world, never

knowing he had been chosen for a special purpose. He closed his eyes, his thoughts carrying him back.

Florida.

Near the Cape. Sun. Loving, warm breezes caressing him as the Atlantic laps against the sand. A shimmering sheen of perfection with each wave.

Vryke's mother is drunk. Passed out on a blanket, still gripping the bottle. His father sits dutifully beside her, brush cut, horn-rimmed glasses, his tie lifting in the wind, his face a mask of defeat as he strokes her hair. Vryke is just a boy. When his mother passed out, he had taken a coin from her purse, went to the nearest public telephone and called his dad at his job.

"She came here and drank herself to sleep."

"Are you alright, Eugene?"

"I'm fine, Dad."

His dad had come. He always came for her. He drove them home in the big Ford, then returned to his job as one of the chief computer engineers in America's space program.

Vryke's mother was insane. She had gotten that way giving birth to him, his father told him many years later.

"You were a complicated pregnancy. She went through extreme pain."

His birth also brought her a profound case of postpartum depression, dementia, and alcoholism, Vryke's father had said. She never held her son. Refused. They hired a nurse. No one would ever believe Vryke, but when he journeys into the deepest, earliest reaches of his memory, he can hear the echoes of her screaming rejection of him.

"Get that thing away from me!"

Vryke's father was a detached computer scientist who had worked with some of the greatest minds in history. He provided for his family but had been married to the Mission, to beat the Russians to the moon.

It happened several years after Vryke's dad took on a new job with NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center south of Houston at Clear Lake.

Vryke's mother had ended up one night with her son on the Gulf Coast, at Galveston. Her flashes of warmth to him were steeped in alcohol. That night she had curled her hair, put on lipstick, a pretty dress, necklace, bracelet, slipped a small bottle into her purse, and took him on a Greyhound south to see the beach.

"Don't you just love the beach, Eugene?"

In Galveston, she had bought him a hamburger and fries at a restaurant, sitting there spiking her Coke, then taking him for a walk on the beach where she had passed out. Vryke had gone to a gas station where he called his dad, giving him their location.

His father came.

But at the outset of the drive home, his mother, still intoxicated, had begun to wrestle him violently for control of the car. It crossed the centerline, into the path of a fully loaded tanker, clipping it. Vryke's mother was killed,

his father's chest was crushed, and Vryke was fired from the rear seat, smashing through the windshield face-first, sliding on the asphalt for some thirty yards.

Vryke's face looked like a tomato someone had stomped in a fit of rage. But he lived; so had his father. If you could call it living.

After they had buried his mother, Vryke and his dad sank deeper into their own dark worlds. His father sold their house and they moved into a trailer park in Houston. His dad lost his job at NASA, living on a disability pension and the small insurance payout.

His father had begun drinking, which was okay because when he was sober he was barely able to look at Vryke. His face had swollen into a hideous ball of stitches atop his body. The kids at school called him a scarecrow. He refused to go to classes and stayed home, sitting in the dark, or reading. Vryke and his dad could go for days without voicing more than five words to each other. It was not a matter of dislike. They were two broken souls.

Vryke had liked to read. He digested the Bible, Shakespeare, and his dad's old computer books. He had the strange ability to understand what, to the rest of the world, were hieroglyphics. Vryke had amused himself by taking apart and reassembling old computers his dad had brought home from NASA. Sometimes they worked together on them, his father teaching him when he was sober. Vryke felt good when he was learning from his dad.

Then on July 20, 1969, while the world rejoiced, Vryke felt what he now realized were the first stirrings of his fate.

As the planet participated in the glory of man's first steps on the moon, Vryke's widowed father had been passed out drunk on his sofa in a trailer park some five miles from mission control.

Vryke had grown anxious, then sad, watching his father.

His dad had helped construct NASA's computer system for the Apollo craft; had played a critical role ensuring the Eagle's landing on the Sea of Tranquility. But he had been excluded from it all as the black-and-white lunar TV transmissions flickered on their set and Neil Armstrong was emerging from the landing craft, to write a new chapter in history.

Vryke had tried in vain to wake his dad.

"Dad, please. It's your work! Your life's work!"

As Armstrong had descended the ladder to speak his immortal words, Vryke's tears flowed, the flickering TV images painting his heartbroken face with the sudden realization of his family's tragedy, their curse, the futility underscored by mankind's triumph.

Why had God shunned his family? His father had given his life, offering everything, the fruits of his labor, only to be rejected, as if he were descended from Cain. Why?

Vryke had stepped outside into the humid Texas night, lifting his face to the moon. As cheers had rippled through the community, he had cursed God and the world.

My dad helped put you there but you have forsaken him and damned us.

Vryke felt himself swelling with a sense of vengeful purpose, the little boy, the scarecrow standing alone in a trailer park shaking his fist at the stars.

The day will come when you will know our name.

And history will never forget it.

Several years later, they had moved to a small town on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., where Vryke's dad got contracts repairing government computers through his small business.

They had lived in a small apartment above the office. His dad still drank, so Vryke helped with the business, becoming more self-taught as he studied some of the advanced national security computer systems of the NSA, the CIA, the FBI, the Pentagon.

One summer, inspired by his dad's reminiscing about his own early years, Vryke had hitchhiked to Boston. He had gone to Cambridge, to Harvard, and found the building housing the old Automatic Sequence Controlled Calculator, one of the world's first computers. It was an electromagnetic system used to solve military problems. Vryke had peered at it through the basement window with the utmost reverence. Upon his return, he had enrolled in a few evening college courses, not to learn, but to meet people, hoping older students would see beyond his disfigurement. They hadn't. He had heard their comments behind his back.

"What's with that guy's face?"

Vryke worked to ignore them but it hurt, especially since he had no one to turn to. No friends to talk to. He had never known a woman's love. He had ached to connect with another human being, but accepting how grotesque he was to others, he kept himself immersed in computers, until one day a girl began talking to him.

Cynthia.

Blondish hair, gray eyes. Really good smile. She had been nice to him, talked with him, even partnered with him for some of the lab work. He had told her one day he was self-taught and built computers, that someday computers would dominate society.

"I believe you." She had smiled and squeezed his hand.

Something magical had happened.

He lay in bed that night touching his hand. No one had ever touched him before. He had warm, pleasant thoughts about Cynthia and began telling her more about his life. She had seemed to care, touching his shoulder, listening, patting his hand over coffee in the cafeteria. His heart had come alive. Soon he found he could think of nothing but Cynthia and wanted to give her a gift. He had thought about it for days. It had to be something special, something no one else could give her.

A poem.

He began working on it early in the morning and late at night, tearing up pages, starting again. He had kept his writing pad at his bedside. He consulted

the classics, struggling for the right words to convey what he had kept locked inside for much of his life. After nearly two weeks, he had finished what he felt was a beautiful one-page poem for Cynthia.

He had waited for the right time, the right moment to give it to her, which came a few days later. They were alone finishing up in one of the labs.

"Uhm," Vryke said, *"I have something for you."*

"Oh. What is it, Eugene?"

"Something I wrote. Just for you."

"Really?" Surprise in her eyes and something else he -- *"Are you going to give it to me?"*

He had nodded, producing the neatly folded paper hidden in his textbook, written in his best script, without any errors, on one page. He had put it in her hands.

"Oh my."

She had begun reading. His heart had swelled, for he had envisioned this moment over and over, his pulse racing, praying she would understand his love, embrace him, kiss him. His breathing almost stopped, watching her gorgeous gray eyes following his words, the very words he had agonized over alone at night for so many nights, her beautiful fingers, their perfect polished nails holding the page on which he had spilled his innermost thoughts, his soul. He had been sweating and his throat had dried with nervousness. A hand went to her mouth, to stifle something. Her eyes rolling, searching for something on the ceiling. Then she had spoken.

"This is funny."

Funny? He hadn't understood. Funny?

"I mean, Eugene, you're not serious."

Something inside had been fracturing.

"Wait until I tell Buck. He'll love this!"

"Who's Buck?"

"My boyfriend."

Boyfriend? Now the forces swirling inside Vryke began to coil, tense with anger. Boyfriend?

"Cynthia, I thought, I was your, I mean, what about us?"

"Us?" That had triggered a chuckle, launching a spittle spray into the scars of his face. *"Eugene, no. I'm sorry but I'm sure I told you about Buck. Eugene, you're a nice, smart guy, I'm really getting good grades here and --"*

As soon as her words were voiced, Cynthia realized she had ignited something terribly dark and struggled in vain to reel them back.

"Lord, please, no Eugene -- no - I didn't mean…"

Waves of pain rolling through him, making him confused, the pain of his life, his heart disintegrating, withdrawing into his stone fortress, stone sinking, drowning in pain. Cynthia, you have to save me, he had to save his mother, she was drunk again, he had to call Dad, the truck, Dad, his mother

sliding, she's sliding, her body, scraping on the road next to him, his father drunk, the lunar landing, no, not like this, Cynthia, please, if she kissed him, if she just kissed him like a princess kissing a frog she would see, can't she see he is in such pain?

"Eugene what are you doing? Let go of me!"

Suddenly it had felt as if the floor leaped up to smash his head. Cynthia had reached for something, anything, fingers tightening around a bottle, breaking it against his skull over his ear, liquid burning through his auditory canal, then eating its way down the Eustachian tube, eroding the middle ear, membranes and other canals, advancing on his brain. The ambulance and Vryke screaming. By the time the doctors had gotten to work on him they were barely able to save his life.

It was a miracle, the surgeon had told Vryke's father, explaining how they believed they'd halted and captured all the acid with a series of aspirating needlework incisions, sponges, and diluting flushes, with no damage to the brain. Although hearing loss in one ear was a given, there was hope for some restorative surgery. *"But he'll need regular complex neurological treatments for the rest of his life to fend off acid excretions. And there is no guarantee that he will not ultimately succumb. He'll die without the treatments and with them he'll be in a painful battle to survive."*

Vryke had retreated into his lonely world of computers while his father exhausted much of his life savings paying for the expensive procedures and drugs that would keep his son alive.

Several years ago Vryke's dad had died of a heart attack, leaving him alone with their computer business, his nightmares, and his destiny. He had less than a month to fulfill it. Vryke could not afford another betrayal.

His chariot to immortality awaited him and his chosen one.

Vryke stared at his newest file, looking into her eyes.

Yes. She was The One.

Vryke was coming for her at nearly 500 miles an hour.

TWENTY-NINE

Driving south out of San Francisco along the coast, Sydowski had the windows rolled down to savor the cool Pacific breezes.

Turgeon was back at the detail reviewing reports of the insurance company's employees and policyholders who live near Stern Grove. Nothing so far. Sydowski was awaiting more analysis from the lab, using the time to step back from the case and check on his father. The ride to Pacifica was always therapeutic for him, often yielding an insight or a fresh angle. Besides, he thought as he halted his car in front of his old man's unit at Sea Breeze Villas, he could use a haircut.

Sydowski's old man was at the rear of his place, sitting in his Cape Cod chair. In his eighties, his old man was healthy. Still, it saddened Sydowski to see what time does. His dad was wearing baggy pants, a frayed sweater and a plaid shirt with a comb peeking from the breast pocket. The big strong hands that a lifetime ago had taken him through ballpark turnstiles were now gnarled and slower as he folded his tabloid on the latest message from Elvis.

"How about a trim, Pop?" Sydowski said in Polish.

"Sure. Sure. Come in. I'll fix you up."

Indoors, it took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the light change. Sydowski enjoyed the room's scent of Old Spice, just like the old shop. Because of his age, Sea Breeze administration barred Sydowski's old man from giving straight-razor shaves. Haircuts were another matter. His old man snapped the big towel, draping it around his son's neck, tying it at the back. He ran the comb through his hair, began snipping, and catching up.

"So what's new, son?"

"Went to the old neighborhood the other day. Had soup at the Greek's."

"Which one runs it now?"

"Telly, the youngest one."

"That one. Receding hairline, premature baldness."

It was as if they had resurrected the conversations that filled his old man's shop all those years ago -- politics, sports, Sydowski's work.

"So how you doing on the bride girl murder?"

"We're working on a few new angles."

His old man stopped, just like he did when he cut hair for SFPD detectives years ago, and gestured. "Here is my advice. You want to catch this guy?"

"Yes."

"Then you go look in the weirdo department."

"The weirdo department."

"That's right. Because anybody who does that to a nice young girl is a weirdo. Check in the weirdo department. You find him and shoot him."

"I never thought of that, Pop. Thanks."

When they finished, Sydowski called Turgeon.

"Nothing happening right now. Walt, I was talking to Golden Gate, we should submit it all to VICAP."

"We'll talk about that later."

"Walt, you have to consider it."

"I'll be back in a little while."

Sydowski then decided to do something he had not done for years. "Let's go for a walk on the beach, Pop."

"Sure."

Sydowski removed his shoes, socks, rolled up his cuffs, letting the surf and sand soothe him, melt some of his tension, reminding him how much he loved California.

"You know Pop, I called the girls. They don't see a problem with me dating Louise."

"Nobody does but you. Look." His old man's tone signalled a lecture. "You have to step back and look at the whole thing. Basha's been gone almost, what? Seven years. You are not being fair to Louise. If you like her, tell her and do something about it. If you want to live like a monk, tell her, then disconnect your phone. She's too good for you, anyway."

Sydowski stopped to absorb his words. His father was right. Absolutely right. He was not being fair to Louise, he thought, gazing at the Pacific's beauty.

Back in the city, Sydowski headed for Stern Grove to the spot where they found Iris Wood's abandoned Ford Focus. He parked on the shoulder.

The same shoulder where she pulled over for him.

Sydowski killed the ignition, heaved himself out. He leaned against his fender, folded his arms, standing there. Thinking.

A pleasant peaceful pocket of the city. A few houses on the Grove's southern edge. Birds twilling in the redwood and fir of the park. Not much traffic, nothing marking the spot to indicate that this was ground zero, the point of contact, where he had stopped her, coming up behind her, tricking her to leave her car and enter his. Then he had owned her. Sydowski studied the area the way a grandmaster studies a chessboard.

But Iris Wood's killer made a mistake.

There is a fundamental tenet known by homicide detectives that some call the transfer theory. It arises from the fact that no matter how careful, no matter how meticulous, a killer *always* leaves something of himself at a scene and *always* takes something of the victim. You cannot exist in this world without leaving or taking a trace of something. Anything and everything is

evidence.

Iris May Wood's killer was no different.

He had left his trace here where he stopped her.

Sydowski was the one who discovered it. Everyone else had missed it. Only Turgeon, Leo and the crime scene techs knew what it was.

Now it was up to the lab.

It was critical.

Sydowski rubbed a hand over his face, blinking at the memory of Iris Wood, the little girl rescued from the fire that destroyed her family. The woman who each day searched for words to comfort the bereaved. A person who had hurt no one, who lived a quiet life only to have it end with her stabbed fifty-three times, her face removed, and her corpse displayed in a wedding gown.

Sydowski bent his knees to touch his fingers on the road where the killer had led Iris Wood to her death.

Fear thou not; for I am with thee.

It was coming together. One piece at a time.

THIRTY

Sydowski lived just north of Stern Grove in a modest two-story house in Parkside where he and his wife had raised their daughters. The girls were grown, married, had children of their own and lived in the East. They flew out to visit him and his old man on holidays. He wished it were more often.

Sydowski's grandchildren loved his backyard with its plush lawn, stone walks, shrubs, flowers and the little aviary he built with its curtained flower-box windows, tucked like a fairy-tale cottage in one corner under an oak tree.

He ducked his head, entering the doorway of the aviary to the cooing of several dozen birds, the ribbons, and trophies won at bird shows on the paneled walls, the rocker the girls got him one Father's Day. His new-bred Budgerigars he picked up last year were coming along since he fortified their seed mix with calcium. He loved their opaline and cinnamon wing markings.

Checking the food and water supply of his birds, he remembered how he began raising them. Years ago, a friend gave one to his wife as a gift. He was enchanted by its song and how it soothed him, especially when he was grappling with his darkest cases. He inspected a nest of two fledgling fancies, ten days old. He got them from Louise after they met at last year's Seattle bird fair. His old man was right. He had to sort out things with her soon.

To work now.

Sydowski sat in his rocker, closing his eyes, the cooing transporting him into his homicide.

Iris Wood's killer seethed with rage and wanted the world to know, to know that somehow she was to blame. That's why she was displayed. That was his signature here. It was almost artful, surpassing just about anything Sydowski had experienced.

You're smart but you couldn't overcome the unforeseen. The city was doing some roadwork on Crestlake where you grabbed her. You missed it in the dark, the fog.

After Sydowski put Crime Scene on it, one of the senior techs had called him, to confidentially alert him that maybe, just maybe, they had something.

"Walt, this guy was extremely careful. Actually he's probably the cleanest I've ever seen. What you noticed out there got by everybody. This could be the break we need but we're going to need time for more tests, maybe send stuff out. You know, Walt, in the literature, this is the most commonly missed piece of evidence."

Sydowski's phone extension in the aviary rang.

"Hi, it's Louise."

"Hi there."

"I'm glad I caught you at home. Are you going to be there much longer?"

"A little while."

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"I was just going to make something."

"Don't. I'll be right over."

A short time later, Louise stood on his doorstep. Smiling in her lavender slacks, matching sweater, purse over her shoulder, hands gripping the handles of two large shopping bags laden with hot takeout food.

"Hope you're hungry, buddy."

"What's this?"

"Caesar's salad, sirloin, baked potatoes, steamed vegetables, fresh bread. I'm in town for a while making a series of national commercials for an over-the-counter aid. I am a busy restaurant owner with a bladder-control problem."

They set the table with plates and utensils.

"The restaurant where we're shooting is making a killing. They went overboard cooking for the crew. We just knocked off and I thought of you."

"This is terrific." Sydowski helped her set out the food. "But I'm expecting a call and may have to rush off."

"That's okay, Walter."

During dinner, they talked about her commercial, his visit to his old man, birds, and the case.

"Have you worked things out over your old partner, Reggie, with that detective you were telling me about, Wyatt?"

"I told him to keep out of the way because he's not a real cop."

"Don't you think you were unduly harsh?"

"No. What are you getting at?"

"Maybe seeing your old partner on the street, picking through trash, underscored your guilt over losing touch with him?"

"Why are you defending Wyatt? He's the reason Reggie's like he is."

"No, it's not like that."

"Sounds like it to me."

"You told me that you felt bad for losing touch with Reggie. Then to have Wyatt assigned to your case probably worsens those feelings."

"Damn right."

"When what you really want to do is help Reggie. Beating up Wyatt doesn't help Reggie."

"What the hell are you getting at? Wyatt's a goddamn liability."

"You're not listening, Walter."

Sydowski's cell phone began trilling.

"You've never met Wyatt. He's a coward, a waste of skin. He's the walking, talking reason Reggie's got a bullet in his spine."

The phone kept ringing.

"Listen to me, Walter, I've talked to some lawyer friends about Reggie's case."

"You did *what?"*

Sydowski's house phone was now ringing.

"Louise, what do you think gives you the right --"

"We can help your friend. You said you wished there was a way to help him and there might be."

"So you just started telling lawyers about Reggie?"

Sydowski shook his head. The phones kept ringing.

"Walter, please just listen to me. The lawyers made some calls to friends at the city's legal department. It seems Reggie may have grounds for a civil claim --"

He was glaring at her for crossing a line.

"Walter are you going to --" Louise grabbed the phone. "Hello!"

Stunned silence at the caller's end, then a request.

"He's right here. It's Linda." Louise thrust the phone at him.

He took the call, watching Louise collect her things.

"Hello, Walt?" Turgeon said. "What are you up to there?"

"Louise, wait!"

The door opened.

Turgeon sensed a problem at his end. "Walter? What did you do?"

"Just a minute." He hurried to the door, to watch her Chrysler pull away. "Damn it." He went back to the phone.

"So, Walt, you used your free time to fight with your girl?"

"You ready to work on the case?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll meet you at the Hall."

THIRTY-ONE

At the detail, Sydowski launched a pre-emptive strike at the question on Turgeon's lips.

"I'm not going to talk about Louise. Don't waste your words, or our time. Let's get to work."

"Fine, Walt. But there's not much here."

Sydowski removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. As twilight brushed over the city, they worked alone in the darkened homicide detail under the sixty-watt halos of gooseneck lamps. Turgeon was in jeans and an old academy T-shirt, her hair clamped in a small bun, wearing her new glasses, which reflected the pages as she studied her portion of traffic-unit patrol logs, statements, reports on the insurance company's policyholders, employees, Iris Wood's neighbors.

Sydowski sat across from her, his tired eyes peering sadly through his bifocals, as he wet his forefinger and worked through the summaries of all unsolved ritualistic California homicides that might be related to this one. Some decapitations, some limb and finger removal out of L.A., but all were suspected to be gang or drug related. The other detectives in San Francisco's homicide detail were kicking his case around. Most of the city's murders were shootings, stabbings, beatings, arson murders, very few with ritualistic overtones like this case. It was frustrating.

The only sounds in the room were Turgeon's annoying pen tapping and Sydowski's crunching of a Tums to sooth his heartburn from his dinner and flare-up with Louise.

"Walt, are you ever going to make a full submission to VICAP?"

"Maybe. Go home if you're bored."

"Walt. I've talked with Dee, the FBI VICAP coordinator at Golden Gate. She's urging us to make a full submission to Quantico. Have you read the latest item on VICAP in the Law Enforcement Bulletin?"

Sydowski ignored her. Turgeon rummaged around for the article, determined to bring him into this century. She skimmed it again, reading parts aloud to Sydowski.

> *The Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, known as VICAP, is the FBI's national computerized database which analyzes, collates, and searches for links in murders and serious violent offences of cases submitted to it. The brainchild of Pierce*

Brooks, an LAPD detective who, in the 1950s, had a case of a killer who was placing ads in Los Angeles-area newspapers seeking women to model. The killer would take their pictures, rape them, then hang them. Brooks suspected his murders were linked to others beyond his jurisdiction so he went to the public library to search for similar murders in out-of-town newspapers. Sure enough, he found other cases with enough links and evidence to track and arrest the killer. The FBI picked up on his idea and worked with him over the years to develop a central computerized data system for police to quickly share information on mobile suspects.

"Any of this sinking in, Walter? He sought outside help."

"I know all about VICAP." Sydowski's attention was on his files. "I'd like to do a little more work on my case, please."

"We live in a new century, old-timer."

Turgeon kept reading.

VICAP requires detectives to complete some 95 questions detailing every known aspect of the victim, the suspect, the crime scene, including key facts or hold-back evidence. Once a case is submitted, FBI analysts continually compare all submitted files with others searching for matches, signatures, patterns. When they get a hit, detectives are alerted but their hold-back evidence is never revealed.

While using VICAP was not a legal requirement, the article said more jurisdictions were making VICAP submissions obligatory because more success stories were emerging. The downside, as Turgeon knew, was that many detectives were pathologically opposed to giving up their hold-back evidence to anyone. Sydowski was one of them. It did not matter how many security assurances the FBI offered, Sydowski refused to give up his most important evidence, or details connected to it.

"So, Walt. Are you ready to give it a try?"

Sydowski kept his head in his files, making notes to talk to the unit in State Parole on fugitive parolees, or to check if those on the high-risk psychotic list reside near the Grove, or Iris Wood's apartment. Maybe some had impersonated police officers before. Then there was the Special Services Unit. Could spread the word among their sources.

"Walt? Are you listening to me? You know they guard your hold-back.

Cripes, you won't even let me go over to the VICAP terminal and let us make our own queries because you think somehow your hold-back will leak out if I query northern California and all unsolved murders of white females involving facial mutilation or stun guns, or anything to give us a lead."

"We've got a lead."

"Not yet. The lab's still working."

"Keep it down, Linda."

"I just don't get you. You refuse to let Wyatt help us. He's an expert on computers."

"That guy is useless."

Turgeon grabbed a file. "This old fashioned manual files stuff is useless when we have computer programs designed to do the same damned thing."

Sydowski's eyes burned into Turgeon's over his bifocals. "You know what Wyatt did when I walked in on him at Iris Wood's apartment the other day?"

Turgeon waited for his answer.

"He pulled his weapon on me."

"What?"

"Pulls his gun on me. Sitting in her apartment alone and draws down on me. This is the guy who freezes so Reggie Pope can take a round in the back, then pulls his gun on me. *On me.* Walking into a room." Sydowski jabbed his finger at Turgeon. "And you, of all people, Don's little girl, should fathom what that says about this man."

Turgeon had been ten years old when her dad, SFPD Officer Don Turgeon, was shot and killed on duty.

"Walt. Where is all this coming from?"

"I should write him up."

"Walt, you're not thinking about the case."

"And you want me to give that walking, talking mistake the most precious pieces of solid, unchallengeable, physical, golden evidence we have, so he can play computer games with it? So he can take off into cyber-land asking if anybody's got a lead on the killer. Talk about a useless waste of time. He might as well light a candle and make shadow puppets."

"Walt, I know he is good."

Sydowski yanked off his glasses. *"Good?* I'll tell you what happened when he slipped one of his magic computer disks into Iris Wood's machine. It got fried. Zapped. FBI friend told me Wyatt's trying to keep it quiet, so he can figure out what went wrong."

"Walt, just set your feelings aside about Reggie and give Wyatt a chance. We need him."

"I will not use Iris Wood's murder so that loser can make his life better." Sydowski stopped and ran a hand across his weary face.

"Then give up your evidence to VICAP."

"No."

"It's the only way we'll find a comparable case. You said it yourself, he's likely got a history. Everyone agrees. If he's done it before let's talk to people."

"Christ, Linda, the case is just unfolding. We have a thread, a thread of evidence. If it leaks out, if the killer gets wind, we've lost him forever."

"I think I'm going to call it a night."

Turgeon left.

Sydowski stayed for a long time reading everything they had on Iris Wood's case. It wasn't much. Eventually he locked it in a secure cabinet.

Driving home, he returned to the Stern Grove. Again, he parked his car in the same spot she had halted hers for her killer.

They had scoured city, county, state, federal, and private security vehicles for the Bay Area, patrol logs, dispatcher records, personnel schedules, motor pool, and maintenance lists.

Nothing had surfaced.

Reed's tipster, the paroled addict thief, was good, he gave them a time and his account fit with the shred of evidence. But Sydowski was convinced the killer was not a cop but a guy who posed as a cop. Dash cherries were easy to obtain.

Sydowski got out of his car and carefully retraced Iris Wood's last steps. Nobody at the Hall of Justice knew that he had put in calls to the few homicide detectives across the country he trusted with his life. They were secretly checking his file with similar unsolveds in their yard. Apart from that, he was counting on the lab to come through with more information on the trace they found here and in the bridal shop.

That's all I need. Just a little more to give me a little more.

He stood there in the darkness, Iris Wood's picture in his breast pocket.

THIRTY-TWO

The most powerful lab on earth lies about an hour east of San Francisco, on Interstate 580, in valleys ringed by sunlit hillsides, ranches and vineyards.

Behind the chain link fences, the armed guard posts, the pan-tilt-zoom cameras, and the motion detectors, the University of California and the U.S. Department of Energy operate the Livermore lab.

Here, a variety of complexes house an array of top-secret research critical to the planet's security. Among them: America's nuclear and laser weapons systems, and the computer programs operating and protecting them.

Randy Gricks was a computer security director with Livermore's highest level of security access. The lab's state-of-the-art security network stored his personal identification code, biometrics data drawn from his voice, face, eyes, and hands. All encrypted.

On his way out today, his decryption key was activated and he was gradually cleared to leave the facility when he swiped his Livermore badge at successive remote-access panels. His departure and license plate were video-recorded when he drove his new lime-green VW Beetle from the gate a few miles away to a Taco Bell at an interstate strip mall to meet Inspector Ben Wyatt of the SFPD.

Gricks was a son of California, born in Mountain View. He had studied at Berkeley, Stanford, and MIT before he was recruited from sophisticated spy satellite research projects into the government's ultra-secret computer security community to work at Los Alamos and Livermore. At fifty-one he had a bit of a paunch stretching his Raiders T-shirt. With his bushy silver-white beard, long curly hair, tattered jeans, and sandals, Gricks looked bound for a Grateful Dead concert, Wyatt thought as he watched him park his Beetle, then acknowledge him at the patio before going inside to get a soda. Right on time.

Wyatt was anxious. Security cameras near the bride shop were a washout. No one at the Hall knew he was pulling this little end run for outside help on a homicide. To hell with it. There was too much at stake. Besides, who would care or understand? Certainly not Sydowski. Gricks arrived at the table.

"We never had this meeting, okay, Randy?"

Gricks nodded slightly as Wyatt told him about Iris Wood's case and what had happened with his disk when he tried it on Iris Wood's system.

Gricks seemed bored, sucking on his drink as he listened.

The two men had met a few months earlier at a security seminar at the FBI San Francisco division's Computer Intrusion Squad in Hayward. Wyatt

had saved his card, sincerely promising to take Gricks up on his soft-spoken invitation to "call any time" he needed *confidential help.*

Now, after some twenty minutes of listening to Wyatt and the hum of interstate traffic, Gricks sucked up the last of his Taco Bell soda, indicating time was up. Wyatt slid him the small bubble sleeve containing his damaged disk, properties and data from Iris Wood's computer, some details about the security breach at Forever & Ever, and his business card.

"Randy, I need to know what the hell happened, who set up such an attack. I need your help. Confidentially, of course."

Gricks nodded. Then he stood, scratched his stomach, yawned, and stretched before waving good-bye to Wyatt, his sandals making flopping sounds as he returned to his VW.

Wyatt shook his head, realizing that Gricks had not uttered a single syllable the whole time. Must have something to do with his being a cyber-super-genius spook. The guy had worked on CIA computer programs, done troubleshooting on computer security and cyber-counterterrorism for the NSA, Defence, and Justice departments. Now he was a high priest at Livermore, where his job was defending the computers controlling the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal from cyber-attack.

For somebody like Gricks, a request like Wyatt's should be as easy as breathing.

Westbound on the San Mateo Bridge, Wyatt counted six jets lined up for approach to San Francisco International. Optimistic because Gricks was secretly helping him, Wyatt was feeling upbeat. He reached for his cell phone and dialed.

"Caselli's."

"Hi, Olivia, it's Ben Wyatt."

"Hi, Ben."

"I know this is short notice, but I was wondering if you're free for dinner tonight?"

"Well, it just so happens I'm finishing work early today. What time did you have in mind?"

"Seven? I could pick you up at your place?"

"Sure. Here's my address…."

A date.

He had an honest-to-goodness, old-fashioned dinner date. How long had it been since he'd gone on a date, he wondered as he showered and shaved, then slipped on fresh pants, a navy pullover shirt, and a matching jacket.

Olivia's place was easy to find. Her house impressed him so much he had to double-check the address he had scrawled. Very nice. After ringing the doorbell, he stood there with his hands in his pockets wishing he'd brought a gift, flowers, something. He was certainly out of practice as far as dating

went.

"Hi there. Come on in." Olivia smiled. She was wearing cream-colored slacks and a matching sleeveless light-knit sweater. She looked good. They had lemonade on her rear porch where they sat on cushioned wicker chairs, making small talk.

"Are you a bit nervous, Ben?"

"A little."

"Me too. But we shouldn't be."

"Why's that?" The ice clinked in his glass.

"This is our fourth time together."

"You've been counting."

"You came to the shop to check our security. Then Colma where you had me under surveillance. The other day you joined me for lunch at the Square and tonight. Four." She patted his arm. "We're practically an old couple."

"Well this old man's getting hungry." He smiled. "Where would you like to eat?"

They found a place near the marina with a view of the bay. Wyatt was comfortable being with her. Talking, hearing about her day, enjoying her smile at his small jokes.

"It must be exciting being a detective, catching criminals," she said.

Wyatt shrugged. "At times, maybe. Mostly, it isn't."

"But it can be pretty dangerous?"

He looked for an answer somewhere on the bay. *Is this the time to tell her?* He didn't know and heard himself saying, "It can be dangerous. A friend of mine got hurt on the job."

Olivia grew concerned, searching his eyes for a moment. He changed the subject.

After dinner they walked along the waterfront watching the sun set on the Golden Gate and the sailboats clipping along the bay. They talked about growing up in San Francisco and other things they had in common, like both being only children.

"My dad was a firefighter," Wyatt said. "Folks are retired. They moved to South Carolina. How about you?"

"Both passed away. Left me the house."

"It's a lovely house. How long have you been at the shop?"

"Since college. Mrs. Caselli is going to sell it to me. It turns a nice profit and I plan to expand it, maybe with outlets around the bay."

"Sounds like a good plan."

"Ben, this is kind of strange," Olivia said, remembering the advice from her Internet friends: *Be yourself. Be honest with a guy and expect the same from him.* "I don't know how to say this, but at the restaurant, I got a feeling that maybe you had something on your mind."

"I guess you remember it all from the news?"

"Remember what?"

"What happened with my partner a while back. It was in the press."

"No, I don't know what you're talking about. Is this something to do with Iris Wood's murder case?"

"No."

They stopped walking.

"I like you very much," he said.

"I like you too."

"I'd like to keep seeing you."

"I'd like that too, Ben."

"Then before we go any further, there's something I need to tell you."

They sat on a bench. As gulls cried overhead and the lights of the Golden Gate lit the night, he told her how Reggie Pope got shot and still refused to see him. He told her of his futile search for the boy, how he was pulled from street duty, lost his fiancée, how the SFPD never believed or forgave him, leaving him to endure their scorn, even now as he tries to help them find Iris Wood's killer.

"But there was a kid, I swear Olivia," he said. "That's how it is with me. I wanted you to know. I would understand if you wanted to end it here, before things move along or anyone gets hurt. I would understand."

Olivia was staring at the Golden Gate Bridge, thinking of herself, Iris Wood, the people who come to the shop, of what Ben just told her; realizing for the first time in her life that everyone has some measure of pain hidden in a private corner of their heart, and that she was no different. No. And this was a good thing for her to know. It connected her to someone who was honest and had risked his heart. She began shaking her head, saying, "No. No, Ben, I don't want to end things with you at all."

"No?"

"No, because I believe you."

Wyatt felt something awaken in a long lost region of his soul and warm him as she took his hand.

THIRTY-THREE

Reed's line rang at his desk in the newsroom.

"Reed, Lou Del Grachi from the *Daily News."*

"Lou. How are things in the Apple?"

"Don't ask. Molly still at the *Star?"*

"Sitting right next to me."

"Yeah, what's she wearin' right now?"

"An engagement ring," Reed lied with a smile.

"Listen, pal, I've been following your bride-in-the-window murder. Bizarre case but you're all over it, right?"

"All over it."

"This Sydowski, he the lead detective?"

"Yup."

"He any good?"

"He's legendary."

"Any word on how close he is?"

Christ, Del Grachi was sniffing around in Reed's backyard.

"No, I got nothing on how close they are. They're playing it tight," Reed said. "Why? You hearing something?"

"No, but it looks like some old cases in my time zone and some unsolveds in other cities across the nation compare with the bride. I've been assembling a file."

"I've started poking around too, going through the news data files, making a few calls."

"I'll share with you, if you share with me."

"I don't know. I got to think about it."

"What's to think about, Reed? Huh? You forgettin' who tipped you to that New York crack dealer who iced your two undercover cops in San Francisco when they grabbed him in the Bronx?"

"And who tipped you to the Unabomber arrest?"

"We work well together. So here's the deal. I'll fax you stories on the cases, along with some notes of stuff I know from sources. You compare my package with what you know, see what fits, what you can find out. In exchange, we keep each other posted."

Reed was thinking. He could not risk getting beat and this story was shaping up to go national.

"Tom," Del Grachi said, "we both know they're chasing a serial."

"Yeah."

"No telling how big it could be, or if it will fizzle."

"Uh-huh."

"And you know that at this point we don't know which cases they're looking at right now for a signature."

"How do you know I don't already have them?"

" 'Cause it would've been in the paper by now."

Del Grachi was right. There was a reason he had been shortlisted for three Pulitzers. He was good. Still, Reed was suspicious. If Del Grachi had an edge he would have gone with it, he would not be sharing. "Tell me, why haven't you killed some trees with your story, Lou?"

"For one it's not developed. And, I'm up to my neck covering this mob informant trial. I've been on it for months and it's all coming down now, with some new twists. I can't leave that story."

"So why not pass on your murder stuff to someone else at your paper?"

"That one's mine too. I'm not giving it up. Trouble is I'm jammed with this mob story. But your San Francisco case is fresh. You know it better than me, know your cops better than me. You got stuff, I got stuff. I think we're on the right trail. Come on Reed, remember how we worked together in Colorado and South Carolina?"

"How do I know you haven't cooked the same deal with the *Chronicle?"*

"Because I am swearing to you on my dear grandmother Rosa Del Grachi's grave that I am working only with you. Unless you are refusing my offer? Are you refusing my offer, Reed?"

"No. It's a deal."

"I have your word?"

"You have my word."

"Good. Now give me a fax number."

Reed stood over a rarely used Sports department fax machine as it churned out Del Grachi's forty pages of data. He slipped it into a file folder, which he put into his soft leather briefcase, then headed for a small bar across the street and down the block from the *Star* building. He found a corner booth where he ordered a ginger ale and a plate of nachos, then scanned Del Grachi's entire file. Very intriguing stuff. Reed began by reading the gruesome details of the case of a Manhattan office worker. Her corpse was found --

"What are you up to, Reed?" Molly Wilson, her bracelets chiming as she pushed back her hair, slipped her bag from her shoulder, then slid into Reed's booth.

"You stalking me again, Molly?"

"You wish." She rubbed her eyes. "So, is that the little present Lou sent you? You know, I heard the San Francisco end of your little talk on the phone with him. Sounds like you worked a little deal there."

Reed's order arrived, prompting Wilson to request a Heineken. She

crunched on a very large cheese-dripping nacho. “In case you forgot, Tommy, I’m on this story too.”

Reed slid the file to Wilson, then began eating his nachos. “Mea culpa,” he said. “Lou wants to team up on the story. He thinks there’s a New York connection. According to his cop sources, our bride murder could fit with some other unsolveds across the country. A travelling serial killer. But Lou has no link and nobody’s talking. I think it’s all cop theory, inspired by the bride case.”

Wilson’s bracelet chimed as she held up her hand, immersing herself in the information. “Give me a minute.”

“I’m heading to the washroom. Don’t eat all my nachos.”

When Reed returned Wilson had skimmed the file. She was flipping through her notebook and checking details with the cases.

“Hey, you ate my nachos.”

“I ordered more. I think there might be some common factors here.” Wilson swallowed some of her beer, then slid into Reed’s seat beside him shoulder to shoulder, tapping a glossed fingernail on the file at points she had made in some of the homicides. He could smell her Obsession.

“See, Tom. All of them are single white females, early twenties to forties. From large urban centers with clerical type jobs in the core.”

“Right, but keep in mind this is all general.”

“Look at the bits of bio on them. It suggests they lived quiet lives, almost socially detached, isolated. Someday-my-prince-will-come types. I mean it’s general info here, but we don’t have prom queens, community leaders, high-earning professionals with big social networks. I mean by what the data is here.”

“Right. So we have a *type.* Say, vulnerable, insecure, lonely.”

“Easy prey.” She swallowed some beer. “And look here, in Boston, Cleveland, Charlotte, Seattle, Detroit, and Atlanta, investigators seized computers. Suggesting to me on-line dates, lonely-hearts. I just finished a feature on that.”

“Yeah, I read it.” Reed was thinking.

“Tom, we know Iris Wood had a home computer, but nobody has said much about it, right? Turgeon told me that it’s SOP for them to check everything. She implied it was no big deal. You know much more on that, Tom?”

“I get the sense that they’re concentrating on scene stuff, physical stuff. I think they picked up something and are looking at comparisons.”

“Could be, we don’t know their hold back stuff, so…” Wilson shrugged and drank her beer. Reed caught the time on her watch.

“Uh-oh. I have to go.”

Reed saw no sign of Ann’s car when he arrived home. The house was

dark, empty. A thought tapped at the back of his mind in a futile attempt to remind him of something. He grabbed an apple from the kitchen, changed into shorts and a T-shirt, entered his small office and turned on a reading lamp next to his cushioned chair, where he dove into Del Grachi's file.

He returned to the case of the Manhattan office worker. Liandra Morrel. Thirty-five years old. Lived alone in a small studio apartment. No family, hardly any real friends. Read romance novels and belonged to on-line book-club discussion groups. Eleven months ago, her corpse was found in a waterfront warehouse for discarded mannequins from the fashion district. Discovered by two homeless men. Del Grachi's notes said: *They found her among the mannequins, her face was shredded, her heart nearly carved out of her. No sexual assault. She was posed, tied to a rod, dressed in the same office clothes she wore to her job as a secretary for a New York company on Wall Street. Cops figure maybe lured or stalked by--*

A hand touched Reed's shoulder and he nearly jumped from his chair.

"Tom?"

Light filled the dark room. Ann and Zach stood before him.

"I didn't hear you guys come in. Where were you this late?"

"Where were *we?"* Ann turned to Zach. "Go get ready for bed and I'll be in to give you some medicine."

"But, Mom."

"Zach. Go."

Zach left. Ann closed the door behind him.

"Where were *you?* You were supposed to meet us at the doctor with his file this evening." Ann saw the lost look in Reed's eyes. "Tom, we talked about it this morning. I called you, you actually talked to me on the phone about our squeezed-in seven o'clock appointment. You were supposed to bring the file listing the material from the contractors."

"Ann, I was on my way --"

"Oh, I'm too worn out to go through this now." She extended her hand. "Just give me the file."

Reed looked at the file folder containing Del Grachi's pages. Reed did not know how it happened but he had used the folder Ann had given him with their son's records. Reed remembered that Zach's report was splayed on his desk back at the newspaper.

"No, Ann, you go on to bed. I'll take care of it all tomorrow."

"Give me the file." Ann took it from him, opening it, reading. "What's this? What's this doing in Zach's medical file? Where's Zach's file?"

"Ann, it's at work, I've still got a few more calls to make on it and -- what are you doing?"

Ann was sniffing it.

"This smells like Molly Wilson's perfume. Tom, did you? You went to a bar with her to work on this and forgot all about us, didn't you?"

Bingo.

"No, Ann, I --"

The file came flying toward him, the door slammed, and he was alone in his small study. A few moments later it opened. His pillow and a blanket were flung inside. His office had a small couch with a pullout bed. Reed got the message. He sat there for the longest time, letting things quiet down. Then he left the office, passed by the master bedroom with its closed door, and went to his son's room to say goodnight.

Zach was in his bed reading a Spiderman comic book with a flashlight. They whispered.

"Sorry I missed your appointment, I got tied up."

"It's okay, Dad, I know you're on that big murder case."

"What did the doc say?"

"Said I am allergic or reacting or something to something in our house."

Reed inventoried Zach's room wondering what the hell it could be in this house that was making him sick.

"Hey, Dad, can we go to a ball game some time?"

"Sure, soon as I get a break. Go to sleep." Reed kissed Zach's forehead.

Back in his office Reed collected the scattered papers of Del Grachi's file. He pulled out the bed, undressed, catching a glimpse of the one-inch-thick manuscript of his aborted crime novel on the shelf near his home computer. He blinked, knowing how badly Ann wanted him to leave crime reporting, stay home and finish his novel. Maybe he should think about it. Really think about it, he thought, settling into bed with the file, which smelled of Molly Wilson's perfume.

He flipped through some of the cases again. All were generally similar. The common link might be so obvious. Reed yawned, thinking of Ben Wyatt at the cemetery. Wyatt on the case. Wyatt who was yanked from the street after his partner got shot up. Wyatt back working. Where was he all this time? Computer Crimes. Computers. On-line.

Reed was drifting toward sleep.

But something was -- noises -- under him -- scraping -- scratching in the floor -- noises.

Something alive under him, under the floor.

Something scratching under the floor, moving toward Zach's room.

Naw, must be dreaming.

Reed fell into a deep sleep.

THIRTY-FOUR

The routine morning shriek of her boiling kettle summoned Belinda Holcomb to her kitchen.

Wrapped in a pink terry-cloth robe, her hair pulled back and held up with a scissor clamp, she padded barefoot and sleepy-eyed from her bedroom.

"Coming," she said to no one.

It was Saturday. She took her time making her tea this morning, then stepped outside to her apartment's balcony, enjoying her 25th-floor view of downtown Toronto from the west end near High Park.

The morning was clear as she looked at the CN Tower, which spiked a quarter mile into the sky dominating the city's skyscrapers. Sipping her tea, she picked out the big ones including Commerce Court West where she worked.

Five days a week she rose to begin the daily ritual of fretting over what to wear, of rushing to suit up for the charge to the subway to commence jostling for a seat on the train where people hid behind newspapers, books, or icy masks of indifference. Sometimes she grew weary knowing her tomorrows would be no different from her yesterdays. When she first arrived in the city this never concerned her. She had preferred being on her own after being jilted by the only man she had ever loved. But as one year followed the next, she had begun to desire male company. So several months ago, she had set out to change the direction of her life.

Today would be her first test.

Her first date in four years.

It was a blind date. Sort of. His name was Mark. She was meeting him later this morning for coffee. *Can I do this?* She peered into her empty teacup, then gazed at the vast green expanse that was High Park. It was set for 11 A.M. at a café on Bloor, a short walk from her building. *You could always cancel? No, that would be wrong. Maybe he's canceled?*

She went inside and sat at her computer, logging on to the chat site where she met Mark, entering her username, *citygirl89,* and checking her Internet e-mail. Nothing new from him. Likely on his way.

They'd become on-line friends several months ago. Mark was her favorite. She felt comfortable with him, as if she'd known him all of her life. Like a smitten teen rereading old love letters, she reviewed bits of their earlier exchanges.

What is the number-one quality you seek in a man? he had asked her.

A pure soul.

From that point on, they had just seemed to hit it off, especially when

they discussed honesty, loyalty, and forgiveness.

I am convinced we share something extraordinary.

BLUSH. Me too.

My real name is Mark.

Hi, Mark, I'm Belinda.

Belinda, would you like to meet?

Yes, I think I would.

So it went, up until a few days ago.

Belinda, looked at her clock. Goodness. Almost time for the date. Before logging off she went to her last message to him. Feeling somewhat sensitive about ensuring against any misunderstandings before they met, she had written a couple of notes to him the other night. Where was that one passage, oh yes here…

Hey Mark, I'm glad you like my romantic bit about love's fires allowing me to forgive a man ANYTHING! But we have to be serious. Douse the candles and turn up the lights. I mean there are things that some men do that are beyond forgiveness, believe me I know about that! (Smile).

No response.

Belinda logged off, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, and decided to run some errands to keep her mind off the big moment.

Pushing her shopping cart at her local supermarket, she thought it odd that Mark did not respond to her last note. He had always responded quickly.

He had told her he lived in Cleveland, was in software sales, traveled constantly, and lived on his computer. Except when airlines barred him from going on-line, he was always on-line, he told her. Strange he had not answered her last dispatch. She shrugged it off. On the way home she felt inspired to pick up a bottle of wine.

She unpacked her groceries, piled the newspapers on her coffee table in her usual pattern. She loved reading them on the weekend. Today, it looked like nothing but baseball on the front pages from the night game at the Dome.

In the shower, she went over what she would wear. Casual tan slacks and a mauve top that looked good on her, complimenting her figure. Some makeup, not too much. Some Chanel, not too much. Tiny pearl studs, a fine-chain necklace. It was time. She grabbed her purse.

The cafe was a twenty-minute walk, on Bloor's north side facing High Park.

Belinda walked with a slight limp, the result of a genetic birth disorder. She hated using orthopedic footwear in the summer, often eschewing it for a bout of tolerable discomfort in her back because she really loved walking. She had told Mark about her minor affliction. He was so understanding. *Wait until you hear what happened to me.*

Belinda did not regard herself as homely, but knew she was closer to

plain than pretty. Walking in her subtly labored manner to the cafe, she was relieved that she and Mark had exchanged pictures. She carried his in her bag. Like her, he was thirty-three, he said. She thought him attractive. Nice smile, chiseled chin. A professional-looking photo done for his corporate newsletter, he said.

They had agreed to meet from 11 A.M. to noon. To make it easy for him to find her, Belinda said she would be reading a paperback copy of *Great Expectations.* Arriving at 11:06, she inventoried the cafe and the tables under the umbrellas of the terrace, while gripping the book in her hand. She saw a mixture of families, students, downtown professionals, amid the chink of cutlery, and conversations. There was no one resembling Mark. The hostess led Belinda to a table for two on the terrace facing the park and Bloor Street traffic.

This was daring.

Belinda was by and large an insecure woman who was raised on a farm south of Winnipeg at the Minnesota border. She was happy to follow the example of her mother's life, to marry a farmer and have kids. Remmy had been her high school sweetheart. They had gotten engaged and dated for years. She had worked at the local bank, he had worked his dad's farm. She had saved herself for him as they saved to get married. Three months before their wedding, she found Remmy having sex with an older married woman from Minneapolis on the bed of his pickup outside a summer fair dance. The violation had destroyed her and virtually all she had believed in.

Several months later, at Belinda's insistence, the bank manager lined her up with a job in Toronto. From her window on the bus out of town, Belinda had seen Remmy's truck pass, then drop back. Eventually it vanished, like her old life.

Belinda had successfully disappeared in the city, working downtown as assistant to the assistant head of office supplies for a large accounting firm. At home, she devoted herself to her puzzles, painting ceramic pots, making stainless ornaments, reading, and watching old movies. Some time ago, Belinda bought a personal computer and went on-line at home, visiting chat rooms, meeting people, never really taking it too seriously; although she believed it was helping her feel less lonely. Then she had met Mark on-line.

We share something extraordinary.

So here I am. Belinda looked at her watch. She felt safe with the privacy and anonymity of meeting people on-line; still she was anxious. This was her first face-to-face and she had taken all the precautions. She never revealed personal information. Agreed to meet in a very public place for a very short time in the morning. A blind date. Actually, after Remmy, this was her only date.

What was that? Something across the street. The glint of binoculars? Belinda looked deep into the darkened forest of the park. It was like something had been aimed at her for a second. That's silly. She shrugged. It's

a big busy park. A lot of birdwatchers went there. She looked again and saw nothing.

By 12:15, still no sign of Mark. Her waiter was beginning to wonder if Belinda was getting hungry. She shook her head, paid for her drinks, and left.

She went to High Park, struggling with the fact that she had been stood up. *He likely walked by, checked me out, thought "too ugly" and kept going.*

Belinda found comfort in the park, in the cool shade of giant maple and oak forests sheltering the trails meandering along its hills and valleys and gardens. *You can handle this. It was just a lark.* She made her way along her favorite pathways. The park had been a sprawling country farm until the late 1800s when the architect who owned it arranged to give it to Toronto. One of his wishes was that he and his wife be buried there. *How romantic.* Belinda studied the swans at Grenadier Pond. *True love.*

Mark, you are such a jerk. Belinda blinked quickly, sitting on a bench, staring at her empty hands. *Men are all jerks.* She stood to leave, turning quickly, locking eyes with a strange man alone on a bench some distance from her. He turned away but Belinda sensed she was being stared at. She surveyed her area. A young couple, pushing their baby in a stroller while another child toddled alongside, a man in dark glasses with a palm-sized video camera was recording the swans gliding on the water, a teenaged boy and girl were sitting on the grass giggling and cooing. *Must be my imagination.*

Belinda limped home to her apartment.

Ascending the elevator, she felt the pang of hunger and remembered she had a fresh container of ice cream in her freezer. Butterscotch. She changed into her jeans and a T-shirt, seized the ice cream, and headed for her balcony. *This takes care of lunch.* She savored spoon after healing spoon while trying hard not to think about what had just happened to her. Where was he? What had happened? Did he have any idea how hard this could be? How he had hurt her? Jerk. She checked to see if there were any e-mails from him.

Nothing.

Swoosh. Thump.

Belinda held her breath. *What was that?* The bedroom. Her bedroom. She waited. Sounded like something fell. Okay. Investigate. The bedroom door was open. She took stock of the room. Pictures on the walls. Bed made. Nothing amiss. She had just been in here a short while ago changing. The closet? She looked at her large sliding door. Something fall inside the closet? The clothes she had just hung up? Belinda placed her hand on the closet's handle, then slid it, triggering something, tall, tumbling at her, "Oh, darn!" Blurring, magazines falling on her head, shoulders, face, from a high shelf. "Ouch!" *How the heck did that happen?*

She began collecting them. *Must've toppled them after changing.* Belinda sighed, shaking her head. What a day. She decided while restacking them that

she would call her mother back home. Why wait till Sunday night for the usual update? Afterward, maybe she would go out to an early movie. She recalled seeing a notice for a classic that was playing at the old theatre a few blocks west off Bloor.

Her mother's phone rang and rang. Belinda guessed that her mother had gone into town for Saturday shopping. The machine clicked on.

"Hi, Mom. It's me. Thought I'd try you early today. I'll call tomorrow. I love you."

The movie was *Romeo and Juliet,* she remembered, turning to the newspapers to check the listing for the time. She reached for the first paper and froze.

Now that's strange.

The *Star* was on top of the *Sun.* This is not how she left them. *Was it?* Belinda was puzzled. *Was it? Oh come on now, this is just plain silly. Just forget it and check the movie time.* She did.

There was a 5:45 early showing, which was perfect. No crowds, fewer couples. It gave her time to do some cleaning, a load of laundry, get on with her weekend routine.

In the laundry room she inhaled the fragrance of fabric softener and detergent, listening to the machines hum, like an ancient choir, trying hard not to feel humiliated, used, struggling not to draw parallels with what Remmy did so many years ago.

When it was time to go, Belinda put on a sweater set. She walked to the theatre, minding her limp, intending to take a taxi home. *Another date with myself.* She bought her ticket, popcorn, a drink. It was a small theater. She scanned it. As far as she could see, she practically had the place to herself.

She found a seat to the right, close to the wall.

It was the 1968 Franco Zeffirelli classic, made when the lead actors were teens. Belinda adored this version. It was poetry. Its moving score plucked at her heartstrings until she began to weep. As the tears flowed, Belinda knew her sorrow was not for the story but for herself. She had come to sit alone in the dark to mourn her loneliness.

Belinda did not feel his eyes upon her.

She never knew her call to her mother would be her last words to her.

She never knew her final conscious image was that of Juliet taking her life with Romeo's dagger.

For the screen light bathing Belinda's tearstained face illuminated Eugene Vryke's net of scars as he waited behind her, a snake coiled to strike.

THIRTY-FIVE

What the hell *is wrong with me?*

Sitting at a red traffic light, Sydowski tossed his cell phone onto his empty passenger seat after another futile attempt to reach Louise.

Why had he taken out the case -- more precisely, his war with Wyatt -- on her? She was only trying to help him help Reggie. The beep of a horn behind Sydowski told him the light had turned green. He gritted his teeth, dropped his foot on the gas, popping a Tums. Had he pushed away something good in his life?

What have I done?

Disgusted with himself, he shook his head at the gorgeous day, the hazy water of the bay, as he headed into the shipyards at Hunter's Point, where the SFPD had relocated and expanded its crime lab.

The lead lab technician on Iris Wood's case had alerted Sydowski less than an hour ago. *"Walt, you'd better come over as soon as you can."*

Inside, Sydowski found him with Turgeon at a vending machine.

"Hello, Walter," the tech said.

"Got some good news, Horace?"

"I think you'll like what we've learned." A can of chilled tomato juice clanked to the serving door." The tech grabbed it. "Let's go."

Horace Meeker was a fifty-two-year old father of six children with eight grandchildren. He was a deacon at his church in San Mateo. He was about five feet nine inches tall, overweight, with thick, unruly silver hair atop the largest human head Sydowski had ever seen. His prescription lenses could pass for the bottoms of shot glasses. His white coat was open, flapping as they walked, while his sneakers squeaked on the floor. Horace had served in executive positions of national criminalists associations, for next to his family and church, his expertise and passion was analyzing trace samples of paint, glass, hair, and fibers. He was good at it.

The smell of his work area was evocative of a high school chemistry department. The large corkboard above his desk held honors, certificates, the ASCLD seal, snapshots of mostly large-headed children of various ages, and a poster with two words: THINK SMALL

The world Horace worked in was microscopic, ruled by his scanning electron microscope-energy-dispersion X-ray analyzer, which could find traces of critical evidence that were virtually invisible. He led Walt and Linda to his computer with its oversized monitor and began presenting his case, as if he were preparing for court.

Firing up and adjusting his machines, then opening his tomato juice,

Horace said, “Make yourselves comfortable.” The detectives rolled up swivel chairs next to him.

“It was a brilliant catch you made at Stern Grove, Walt,” Horace said.

“The line on the road felt slightly tacky, to me.”

“The morning before the victim’s car was stopped, the city had just completed applying fresh road-marking paint. White. It worked beautifully, attracting dust and residue for us to get latents. Crime Scene located several clean, hard footwear impressions, photographed, then collected them with a lift kit. We also used an electrostatic lifter. Here’s what we got.”

Horace displayed a clear, large picture of the sole of a shoe, athletic-type footwear, showing its distinctive pattern and worn areas.”

Sydowski nodded. “That’s good, Horace. Very good. I was counting on something coming up where he stopped her. But Crime Scene said there was nothing inside the shop. He wore gloves, shoe covers. He was clean, careful.”

“That’s true. They went over everything and the impressions they found were consistent with someone using covers. This guy is very good, Walt.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“But thanks to your catch on the Grove, we got a break.”

“A break?”

“Crime Scene went back on everything, I mean everything. The flooring, tile, and carpet throughout the shop. And we got real lucky. We got a few partial shoe impressions that match our Stern Grove impression.”

“Jeez, Horace. How?”

“My guess is that when he was in the shop, he was struggling at a critical moment with the victim. Maybe he lost his balance, tripped? His foot likely brushed against the other, or his ankle, tugging the shoe cover down, exposing him, allowing his shoe to make contact on the ledge of the step up to the display. He appears to have wiped the area but missed this one. Look.”

Sydowski inched his concentration closer to Horace’s monitor and the image of a partial shoe impression from the heel halfway to the toe.

“It’s is the only hard surface impression we got from inside the Forever & Ever wedding dress store. Watch.”

Horace split his computer screen, juxtaposing the shoe impression from the road and the partial shoe impression from the shop, lining up their direction and scale for easy comparison. “I think a court would see we’re talking about the same shoe here.”

Turgeon took notes while Sydowski nodded slowly. “This is good, Horace,” he said. “It gives us a start.”

“I said we were lucky. There’s more.” Horace swallowed some tomato juice, then told them how, near the ledge, Crime Scene found one partial imprint of the suspect’s shoe on the carpet.

“It was deep. I figure he was carrying her part of the way, the extra weight driving his exposed shoe into the carpet. After fiber analysis. I found in the carpet impression flecks of the same white road-marking paint --

chlorinated, rubber based, containing reflective glass beads -- as was used by the city at the scene. Same composition. Same lot. Same pigment, further evidence that the shoe that was at the stop scene was also at the murder scene."

"Good work," Sydowski said. "That it?"

"There's more."

Horace displayed a clear picture of a small item that had been stuck to the suspect's shoe. It had been found in the bridal shop. A small sticker, creased, tattered, torn, dirty but with markings in ribbon-like repetition. They were legible, reading: BWI.

Turgeon repeated the letters, then jotted them down.

Sydowski's eyebrows climbed. "I've seen that style of sticker before. Looks like an airport code."

"Baltimore-Washington International," Horace said. "Judging from the tear, I would bet there is more of this sticker embedded in the shoe."

"Damn," Turgeon said. "This is good."

"I did extensive work on the fibers found on the adhesive side of this BWI sticker. They sort of collected and rolled up in a sample. What I found are some traces, here" -- Horace displayed a picture -- "fibers of flock carpeting, the type of carpet used in commercial aircraft. It is long lasting, crush resistant, easily treated for flammability, stands up to stains and repeated commercial cleaning. I've already sent a package to the FBI for further analysis."

Turgeon studied the monitor. Sydowski was thinking. "But aircraft manufacturers all likely use the same product."

Horace shook his head. "Not always. They install as per the customer's requirements. These fibers" -- Horace nodded to the monitor -- "are from a Malaysian producer. Zorilio. Largely supplies airlines in Africa and the Pacific Rim. I made some calls to textile experts, then contacted Zorilio. Their carpets were installed in the jets of two U.S. companies. A charter line that connects New York, Boston, and Orlando. Nothing to Baltimore and California.

"What about the other company?" Turgeon said.

"An upstart commercial carrier, called Five Star Skyways."

"Well, Horace," Sydowski said, "does Five Star have flights connecting Baltimore, Washington, and San Francisco?"

"Six flights daily."

THIRTY-SIX

In the Star newsroom at his desk, Reed dialed a number in Kentucky. A woman answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello."

"I am calling for Dolores Finch."

"I'm Dolores Finch."

"The mother of Amy Finch?"

Her voice now guarded. "Who's calling please?"

"Tom Reed. I'm a reporter in California with a newspaper, the *San Francisco Star."*

"Why are you calling here?"

"You're Amy's mother? Amy worked in Cincinnati?"

"Yes. Why are you calling?"

"Well, ma'am, I am doing some research on unsolved cases and came across the reports on Amy's death --"

"Has something happened? An arrest?"

"No, nothing like that. We've had a recent case here, a young woman murdered in a wedding dress shop. Perhaps you heard of it?"

"No. Maybe I saw something. Look, I don't know. Why are you calling?"

"Well we're hearing from sources, just speculation, that our San Francisco case could be linked to some others across the country."

Reed left the question open, gazing at the printouts from the *Enquirer* of reports on Amy Finch's murder. OFFICE GIRL SLAYING GRUESOME, read one headline. Her color mug shot showed a plain, small-town girl. Thirty-one. Single. Lived alone. Worked in a downtown Cincinnati office tower. Data entry for a national marketing firm. A locator map pinpointed where her corpse was found in an abandoned meat-processing plant. A fact absent from the articles was that Amy Finch was stabbed with such fury the broken blade of the steak knife the killer used was found imbedded in her heart, according to a source of Reed's.

"How would I know if Amy's case is connected to others? How could I know about a thing like that?"

"Has anyone with Cincinnati homicide, or the FBI, mentioned to you recently any theories or anything about the possibility of your daughter's case being linked to others?"

"No. Not at all."

"Did Amy have any friends in California?"

"No, she didn't have many friends. She was -- no."

"Did the police tell you if they have any suspects?"

"No." Dolores Finch thought. "Mr. Reed, if you know something about my daughter's death, I think it would cruel of you to keep it from me. We're trying to put it all to rest here."

"I understand. I don't know anything. It's just that there were rumors arising from our case here that similarities are being compared with other cases."

"What similarities?"

"Well it seems from the news reports Amy and Iris Wood, the woman in San Francisco, both kept to themselves, worked in large cities, lived alone, regularly used their computers on-line, that sort of thing."

Dolores Finch let a long moment pass. Reed heard her sniffle.

"Sometimes," she said, "I used to tell her to go out with the people in her office and meet somebody. But Amy told me she had all the friends she needed on the Web."

"Did she ever try to meet with any of them?"

"I don't want to talk to you anymore. It's been a bad day. Good-bye."

The line went dead in Reed's ear. He hung up, reflecting, then put an asterisk in his notebook beside the line *Cincinnati -- Amy Finch.*

"Any luck?" Molly Wilson called from her terminal.

"Zip. How about you?"

"Same. Cross off Boston, they told me where I could stick it. And I'll call Detroit back. The mother was incoherent," Wilson said. "Tom, we're only working on theories here."

"I know. But that doesn't mean there isn't a link."

Reed went down his list from the files faxed by Lou Del Grachi at the *Daily News.* The list had swelled with others Reed and Wilson pulled from news data banks. The Seattle case was already crossed off. He still had calls out to the relatives of women murdered in Charlotte, Phoenix, and Atlanta. Wilson's bracelets chimed, as she prepared to leave, coming to his desk, shoving her tape recorder and notebook in her bag.

"Look out," she said. "Brader's headed our way." Reed kept his attention on his computer. "He has no idea what we're doing, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll drop by the FBI and see what I can squeeze out of my friends there before I go to the news conference on the drug bust."

"I like that one. Using crucifixes from South America to smuggle dope. You would think with the Lord as your mule you would have some kind of divine immunity."

"Very funny."

"Wilson," Brader said. He smiled. "Make sure Photo has the correct time and place for the cocaine Christ story. We're liking it for front."

"Already done," she said, then left.

"Reed, what do you have for me today?"

"Chasing some leads on the bride shop murder."

"Like what?" Brader invaded Reed's space, installing his butt on the corner of Reed's desk, stretching his lanky legs out. He folded his arms, his yellow pad listing the names of reporters with a short entry on their stories. Reed gleaned it.

Wilson - Cocaine Christ with pix front??

Reed -- Bad cops -- tie in to bride murder.

Brader's attention was on Molly Wilson's departure. He was patting his perfectly groomed hair, while his eyes were locked on her rear end. His nostrils flared. "So, Reed, what leads are you chasing?"

"Trying to get a line on our bride murder being connected to others across the country."

"Is it?" Brader turned to him. "What are you hearing?"

"Just theories mixed with rumors. I want to check them out. I need some time. I think it's worth pursuing."

Brader pulled a fist to his face, chewed on a thumb nail, then examined the results of his gnawing. "I think for today you can build on your story about the witness who saw the cop in an unmarked car stop Iris Wood."

"A witness who *says* he saw a cop," Reed said. "Remember after my story, the SFPD issued a press release dismissing the cop angle after checking with every law enforcement agency in the Bay Area on the whereabouts of their vehicles?"

"All the same, I got a feeling on this cop angle," Brader said. "I want a piece on what makes cops go bad. Get psychological experts, et cetera, get the number of recent high-profile cases, maybe interview that East Bay cop in prison for robbing banks. Make it contextual. Peg it to the bridal murder."

"Just like it says in your little note there."

Brader spit out a piece of thumbnail. "You got a problem with this assignment, Reed?"

"Not at all. But the cop thing is going nowhere."

"Your story said your witness said it was a cop."

"The story also said it could have been someone *posing* as a cop. I think the story you're suggesting is premature."

"Premature." Brader's face was tensing.

"Give me time to follow my leads about other links. I've got a gut feeling that this could be huge."

"You have a *gut feeling?"*

Reed's phone rang.

"Reed just do the story I've assigned you." Brader started to leave. Reed's phone kept ringing.

"It's a pointless story, Clyde."

Brader halted, turned. "What did you say?" Reed reached for his phone but Brader's hand covered his, preventing him from answering.

"Hey!"

"In my office, Reed. Now."

Brader marched off, Reed swiveled in his chair, ran a hand over his face. His phone was in the middle of its third ring, about to click into his voice mail, when he grabbed it.

"Tom Reed."

"This is Glen Spivey." He was on a cell phone; a power saw and hammering were loud in the background. "You left me a message this morning for a list of materials we used on the job at your house."

The line was crackling with static.

"Yeah, Glen, right. We've got a weak connection though." Reed searched frantically through the heap of papers, files, news articles on his desk for Zach's medical records containing the specific questions he needed to ask the contractors.

"Reed!" Brader called from his doorway.

"I said, is there a problem with our work, Mr. Reed?"

"No, nothing like that, Glen. My son may be having an allergic reaction and I need your help -- hello? Hello, Glen?"

Nothing.

Reed slammed his phone down. He'd lost his connection and his patience. *Damn!* Each step he took to Brader's office stirred his anger; anger at how he had hurt Ann and Zach by obsessing over Iris Wood's murder; anger at his need to chase the monster that had displayed her in the bride shop window. He was angry that he had betrayed his family to pursue this story and so many others like it before. It was his affliction, compelling him to sacrifice everything while dealing with people like Brader. Look at him, standing in his office, loosening his tie, putting his hands on his hips. Reed had to laugh, thinking back to their early days at the AP and how he had respected Brader, actually liked the guy. Now look at what he had become. A middle-aged middleweight manager, who made passes at women and wore too much cologne. Brader's office reeked with it.

"Shut the door, please, Tom."

Reed remembered Al Booth, a senior night editor, laughing to him in the washroom last week at how Brader had boasted after several beers in a bar that he was *"going to nail Wilson within three months."* Reed's eyes went to the small framed photo of Brader's wife and daughters. He felt sorry for them, then ashamed, wondering if he was really much different, because instead of lusting after other women, he lusted after stories.

"You know what your problem is, Tom?"

"I'm looking at it."

"You can't take direction."

"You know how many city editors told me that before you skipped in here, *Clyde?"*

Brader held his thumb and forefinger less than a quarter inch apart. "You are this close to being gone."

"You know what *your* problem is? You think you're still a reporter."

"Admit that it burns you that I know the truth about you, Reed. You're just not that good."

"The truth is you'll never let go of me getting shortlisted for a Pulitzer. You're still competing with me, so you can somehow say, *'I win'*. Well, it doesn't matter, Clyde, because you're not a reporter. That ended when you left the street. Your job is budgets, vacations, filling your little pad with story slugs, and convincing yourself you're still part of the news craft."

Brader sat down, glaring at Reed.

"Clyde you're desperate to prove you've somehow beaten me, but you haven't. If you want to battle me, you have to get back on the street."

Brader's left eye twitched as he steepled his fingers.

"Are you refusing this assignment?"

"No."

"Then get on it. You've got two days."

"It's not a story. Not now."

"Reed." Brader's line rang. He took the call. "Brader. Hi. No, I didn't forget." He glanced at his watch making Reed guess Brader's call was from home. Reed noticed Brader's wife and two girls watching them from the small framed photo, recalling Al Booth. *"Going to nail Wilson within three months."* Noticing the cologne, Brader's crisp suit jacket hanging so neatly on a wooden hanger, his perfect hair and gleaming smile. He shook his head as Brader placed a hand over the phone's mouthpiece.

"Two days Reed, or you go to Lifestyles, I swear."

Reed headed for the newsroom vending machines, walking off his tension, buying a soda and a bag of potato chips. The red message light was blinking on his phone when he returned. The first was Glen Spivey, the contractor. Reed returned the call, resuming the search for Zach's file among the clutter on his desk. He could not locate it. He got Spivey's voice mail. *Cripes.*

Reed's next message was from Roland Snell, returning his call from Phoenix. Reed immediately called him back.

"Mr. Snell?"

"Yes." A deep, baritone voice.

"Tom Reed, *San Francisco Star."*

"Yes, I got your message."

Snell sounded friendly, intelligent. But there was something else in his tone that puzzled Reed. Like he was *expecting* the call.

Snell's thirty-three-year-old daughter Elinor, a clerk in Arizona's tax department, had been murdered several months ago. Her Sunfire was found in a far corner of a mall parking lot in the city's Cactus Park area. Her body was in the trunk. Elinor had been single, lived alone. Attended church every Sunday. She had volunteered at a local homeless shelter. It was thought a drifter might have followed her to her car one night but that theory was

weakened by the fact she was not sexually assaulted, nor were her cash, credit cards, or apartment keys missing from her purse, according to reports in the *Republic.*

"Yeah, I heard about that bride shop case in San Francisco," Snell said after Reed explained why he was calling. "At the time, I think I was in Sacramento, delivering a load of lumber from Spokane." Snell was a trucker. In one early story, he told the *Republic* how when Elinor was young, he would take her with him on some trips. *"My little girl saw America from the passenger seat of a Freightliner and to see her life taken in this way just tears a man to pieces."*

Snell told Reed his timing was good.

"Why?"

"Well I just got home from business downtown. Had to see a lawyer about Elinor's affairs, so I dropped by Phoenix homicide to see if Bill Sample was around."

"Bill Sample?"

"The detective on Elinor's case. I dropped by to see if they had anything new. I figure that's why you're calling from San Francisco, because of the new lead?"

The new lead? Reed's mind raced. *What new lead? Just bluff it. Pretend you know.*

"What do you make of it, Mr. Snell?"

"I'm hopeful. Bill said he should not be telling me, but we've put back a few since my daughter's death, and he was pretty encouraged by the break."

"I bet."

" 'Course he didn't tell me the details, just what the FBI relayed to him, you know, that San Francisco might have something that could connect their case to Elinor. And all those others."

All those others.

Reed swallowed. Jesus.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Olivia looked through Caselli's storefront window and happened to see a uniformed police officer strolling by. Her attention went to his holstered gun and she thought of Ben.

It concerned her, seeing how deeply troubled Ben was at being blamed for his partner's wounding, how he desperately needed someone to *believe him.*

She believed him. He was a good man. An honest man. She saw it in his face, his eyes, felt it in her heart. She sensed he somehow needed to be forgiven, to be free of the terrible weight of being wrongly accused.

It was funny, Olivia thought while tidying the greeting card selection in "Forgiveness." She had long ago given up on the possibility that someone like Ben would ever need someone like her for anything. But here he was, reaching out to her, risking his heart. She would help him, even if it meant risking hers. Because she wanted to, because she needed to. And if it meant her heart would be broken in the end, well, so be it.

The transom bells chimed and Mrs. Caselli entered to relieve Olivia for lunch.

"How is it today?"

"Very good, Mrs. C., forty-one orders." Olivia went to the back room, returning with her lunch and purse.

"Olivia, wait. I don't like this," Mrs. Caselli was behind the counter. "When are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"You change. You change your hair, you talk more to people. Now you have a new boyfriend, but you don't tell me. Juanita from the coffee shop told me she saw you with a man just the other day. She says he's a very nice-looking man. But you don't say anything to anybody."

"His name is Ben."

"Ahh. Ben." Mrs. Caselli said, clasping her hands. "Is it serious?"

"We just met."

"What does he do, this Ben?"

"He's a police officer. A detective."

"Detective." Mrs. Caselli cupped her cheek in her hand. "You're going to see him for lunch now, maybe?"

Olivia shook her head.

"But you will bring him to the shop soon, right?"

"We'll see."

"Olivia, wait!" The older woman's eyes were glistening as she toddled

from the counter to embrace her. “I’m so happy, and you make my Georgio happy too. In my prayers tonight, I’m going to tell him.”

On her way home from the shop Olivia passed by the bridal boutique. Its windows remained sealed with brown paper, and now a sign that said: CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Down the street Olivia saw a young family loading their two children into their van. The mom was lovingly buckling her son, who was about two years old, in his car seat. The dad was taking care of the daughter, who appeared to be a year or so older. Observing them, Olivia realized for the first time that she was not experiencing her usual ache of futility, but rather, a flutter of hope for the *possibility* that something like that could one day be hers.

During her ride home she did not pull out her paperback novel, choosing instead to savor her thoughts on how hope was such a sweet thing, how it kept you going, it kept you alive.

Now hope permeated her beautiful home. For while she ate her dinner, she never heard the ticking of the grandfather clock. Her mind was too busy sorting details of the meal she was going to make for Ben in a few days. She had invited him over for dinner. While she munched on her garden salad and pita bread, she jotted down notes of the items she had to buy and the things she had to do. It was fun.

Later, while washing her dishes, Olivia was reminded of something else she had to do. It came to her as she was running the faucet and squeezing a thread of dish soap into the sink. The soap was the same brand her mother had used and its lemon scent resurrected a moment from her past.

Olivia and her Aunt Maureen had stood here together doing the dishes at this very sink, using her mother’s dish soap, after the guests had left the reception following her mother’s funeral. In the quiet, the air had been taut with that naked rawness that accompanies such events. Olivia and Maureen had exchanged few words. But having Maureen near, in her dark dress, pearls, heavy lipstick and perfume, had been like having her mother next to her. Overwhelmed, Olivia pulled her hands from the sink, threw her arms around her aunt, and sobbed. Her tears and soap bubbles falling to the floor.

Now, Olivia felt the pull of that memory evolving into an urgent message compelling her to call her aunt in Chicago. *Call Maureen. Tonight.*

The dishes done, she fetched the number from a drawer in the living room. It was early evening in Illinois. She glanced at the grandfather clock as the number rang. A man’s voice answered, late sixties, subdued, tired.

“Uncle Randall?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Olivia in San Francisco.”

“My goodness. Olivia, it’s so nice to hear your voice. How are you?”

"I'm fine. How is Aunt Maureen?"

Her uncle hesitated. "To tell you the truth, she's been in and out of the hospital. But I know she'd love to talk to you. Just a moment."

Olivia heard the phone being shuffled and her uncle's distant voice rattling in their big house in Oak Park.

"Mo! It's Olivia in California! Yes!"

The extension clicked and Olivia was overcome by an emotional whirlwind, for her aunt's voice was identical to her mother's.

"Liv, is that you, dear?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it's so good to hear from you, sweetheart. Is everything all right?"

"Yes."

How do you begin to reconnect with the few remnants of family you have? How do you begin to make up for time you lost? Olivia fought her tears.

"Aunt Maureen?"

"What is it, dear?"

"I'm sorry."

"Whatever do you have to be sorry for?"

"It's been so long since I've called, or replied to your letters. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, dear. You're calling now."

"How are you feeling? Uncle Randall said you've been in the hospital?"

"Some days are better than others. The last round of surgery went well, but tell me about you."

Olivia suspected her aunt's health was much more grave than Maureen and Randall were letting on. She'd detected it in her uncle's voice when he first answered.

"I'm fine. I was thinking, I'd like to come and see you in Chicago, a visit. Is that all right?"

"Is that all right? Darling, I've wanted you to visit for so long." Her aunt repeated the news to Olivia's uncle. "When, Liv? You'll stay with us. I'll call Heather. They're in St. Louis now after Martin got transferred from Tampa. Maybe they'll visit too. We could have a little family reunion. They have two little boys now."

"Two?"

"Cutie pies. Devon is two, Dillon is one."

"I'll come soon. I'll call you when I have the dates and my flight and details."

"Yes, dear. This is wonderful news, so wonderful. Olivia, I am so happy you called.

"Me too."

Soaking in her tub that evening, Olivia peered at her scented candles and reflected on how far she had come from that terrible night on the Golden Gate

Bridge. On how the tragedy of Iris Wood, a person she had never met, had somehow offered her salvation, forcing her to take control of her life, leading her to Ben, to reconnect with the fragments of her family, to feel hope, to touch it, to taste it, to risk her heart and be alive in this world. Olivia cherished her new self-confidence, her strengthened self-esteem, and vowed not to abandon those who had helped her find it: her on-line friends. In sharing their anguish, their pain, the torment from the universe of lonely-hearts, they encouraged her to be brave and take a successful step into life.

Time for me to help them.

Olivia sat at her computer, wrapped in her robe, her face glowing from the monitor as she went on-line to chat with her pals out there, thanking them, telling them briefly and without many details that she had met a wonderful person who needed a little understanding and to be forgiven for his past.

A friend from San Diego was the first to respond: *No need to thank us. We're all here to help each other.*

That's what friends are for, wrote a friend in New Orleans.

You made it over the wall, cheering in Philly.

So what's his "past?" Old girlfriends? Ha ha, said a Nashville friend.

Annalee in Dallas was applauding: *What a great thing, reconnecting with your family.*

Hey, livinsf, you go, girl, but just make sure he's telling you EVERYTHING about his past and is not like some of the LOSERS that have inflicted their sorry selves on me, came advice from Boston.

Olivia nodded. Yes, she was careful about getting too close to "virtual people," especially after reading a recent article in the Star about the dark side of on-line dating.

So who is this new person who needs forgiveness? one friend wrote.

We all need forgiveness, right? I actually give it out every day. (smile), Olive answered, chuckling because she sold greeting cards.

The friend left the chat site and sent her an e-mail.

I asked you about forgiveness. I'm the person seeking it.

An e-mail exchange flowed between them.

Did you truly mean it, livinsf, when you say that if you found the right man your love would wash away the sins of his past life?

Yes I truly mean it from the bottom of my heart.

I need your help.

How can I help you?

I've just made a horrible mistake. I trusted my heart to someone who, like you, had promised they could help me.

What happened?

They lied.

Sounds like you were hurt.

Deeply.

I'm so sorry.

Can you help me survive this?

Yes.

I need to know something from you and it must be the truth.

Olivia was cautious. Pulling up her guard. No personal information. No meetings. *Nothing weird or you terminate the conversation,* she warned herself before writing *What do you need to know?*

Do you truly mean it when you say that if you found the right man your love would wash away the sins of his past life?

I do.

You can forgive any sins of his past life?

Yes.

Explain how you would not betray that forgiveness.

I believe pure love can defeat any darkness.

Any darkness?

Any darkness.

Thank you.

Have I helped you?

No reply came.

THIRTY-EIGHT

It was one of those strange number things, Detective Sergeant Martin Reesor thought, looking at downtown Toronto from Wendell Holcomb's twenty-fifth-floor room in his hotel.

Belinda Holcomb's apartment was on the twenty-fifth floor, and the office where she had worked was on the twenty-fifth floor. Now, her exhausted father, Wendell, was sitting on the king-size bed of his room on the twenty-fifth floor, talking on the phone to a funeral director about the final arrangements for taking her home now that her body had been released.

"That's how you prepare it for transporting. Is that a casket?" Wendell said. "I see. Do I sign that form at the airport?"

Across the city through the rain, Reesor saw the SkyDome, where the New York Yankees were playing the Toronto Blue Jays. He'd had plans to be at the game with his nine-year-old son. His ex had custody. Things usually worked out all right since the venom between them had been replaced by court-ordered clauses. But when Reesor had to cancel, his ex gave the tickets to her new boyfriend. He was sitting in the Dome with Reesor's son right now because Belinda Holcomb had been murdered. Reesor had to swallow it because this was his life. Belinda Holcomb was his case. Had been since his pager went off a few days ago.

Wendell finished his call. He did not speak, letting the hum of the air conditioner fill the silence.

Reesor's eyes were like black ball bearings, shining hard from his bald head. He was six one, two hundred pounds, with a thick black moustache. The job had exacted a toll on his life. So, with each case he forged a little personal payback by way of relentless righteous investigative excellence. Woe to the suspect who drew Reesor. His leather shoulder holster squeaked when he turned from the window to his partner, Detective Jackie Winslow, on the bed next to Wendell, rubbing his arm.

"We'll talk with our services people on how you can make arrangements to get her belongings from her apartment shipped home later. They'll talk to her landlord, okay, Wendell?" Winslow said.

Wendell nodded, staring at his shoes through his thick-framed glasses. He was sixty-six years old. His thin white hair was parted neatly, laced over his ruddy skin. His face was the creased, weatherworn face of a God-fearing farmer. His was a life that had been invested in the land, directed by a moral compass, guided by the Good Book.

Reesor saw the hotel room's King James Bible splayed open on Wendell's night table, next to his airline ticket. His suitcase, a fiberboard deal

which may have been fashionable in the 1960s, smelled of mothballs. It was open on the dresser, a framed picture of Belinda at the age of seven, laughing, arms around her grinning father, his hair thicker, darker, rested atop a folded shirt, next to a sweat-stained John Deere ball cap. Had the cap been tossed in by mistake during his anguish after *notification,* or on purpose for comfort?

Wendell was wearing black shoes, black socks, navy pants, a white shirt loosened at the collar with an out-of-style checkered tie that clashed with his jacket. It was what he was wearing when they picked him up at the airport the other day. It seemed he was dressed for Sunday church in a small rural town. Wendell placed his large workman's hands with their powerful fingers and short, worn nails on his knees, the words crawling out of his raw throat as he uttered, "I'm ready to take her home now."

On the drive to the airport, Reesor and Winslow reviewed what they could of the case with Wendell, who sat in silence, the car's wipers thumping, the radials hissing. At one point, Wendell said, "Belinda was supposed to get married, have a family and stay home. I don't know how her mother is going to survive this." In the rear-view mirror, Reesor saw Wendell cover his face with his big hands.

They stayed with him at Pearson International until he boarded, watching the jet slowly roll from the terminal, its running lights strobing, turbines whining. The rain not letting up. Aboard, a broken-hearted father, the body of his murdered daughter in the cargo hold. A country girl going home for the last time, to the edge of Altona, Manitoba, near the Minnesota border. She would be buried in a small cemetery of the Red River Valley amid fields and fields of sunflowers.

Working their way through traffic from the airport, Reesor and Winslow said little. Reesor turned on the car's radio to catch the ball game, keeping the volume low as the rain fell and the wipers pulsed.

"FIS expects to have more results from the crime lab for us tonight," he said. "I want to go back to the squad, go through some statements. Maybe go back on some people tomorrow."

Since they were called out to Belinda Holcomb's murder, everything that had to be done so far, everything that could be done so far, had been done.

Cause of death: multiple stab wounds to her heart. It was a small art-house theater. Two tickets were sold for the showing. No security cameras. Three on the staff. Ticket seller, snack seller and usher. Projectionist had been reading a book. No one remembered the suspect or saw a thing, except the girl at the snack bar.

"Maybe the guy was wearing glasses and was kinda ugly, I can't say for sure. Maybe he was tall and talked to the woman. I thought they were sorta together and, my God, this is really creeping me out, my God, a woman was murdered and we were there, you know, I'm really not sure I remember

anything."

No witnesses. No weapon found. No other injuries or suspect substances found. No evidence of sexual assault, or sexual activity whatsoever.

"I think he stalked her, Jackie, followed her there," Reesor said after they returned to headquarters from the airport and headed up to the squad room.

"The café staff said she sat alone for over an hour, acting like she was waiting for somebody. Maybe a blind date? Remember all the newspapers in her apartment? Maybe she hooked up with him out of the personals?"

It was getting late, a couple of detectives were working at the far end of the squad room.

"The newspapers were clean of any markings. We checked for ads. But we can go back on that. What we also need to do is more work on her computer. When the FIS guys tried to fire it up, it malfunctioned or something. They said they're still working on it. Her ISP get back to you yet?"

"They say her account is garbled or something. They're trying to sort it out. We're hoping to track her activities."

"Good. All right." Reesor sat down and reached for a large file.

"What now, Marty? What about ViCLAS? Want to start filling out the book while we wait for FIS to call? We could get most of it done now."

"Not yet. I want to go through the videotape and pictures of the crime scene. See if I missed anything. You checklist the book, see if we covered everything."

Winslow knew her partner would scrutinize the scene material for hours. "All right. Since we're going to be here a while, I'm going to get us some food." She reached inside her drawer for a takeout menu, then called over to the two other detectives in the squad. "We're ordering Chinese. You guys in?" They waved off the offer. They were on their way out.

Reesor opened the file with copies of enlarged photographs of Belinda Holcomb's murder. She was in her movie theater seat, slumped to her left. Eyes open. Sweater and slacks soaked with blood, dripping to her shoes. Attacked in the dark from behind. The usher found her. Thought she was asleep. Never touched her. Called 911. They managed to get a patrol unit there fast, kept the scene clean.

When the food came, Reesor ate while rereading all the reports and statements they had so far, making notes on who they needed to talk to next.

Nearly two hours later, he stood, stretched, then poked around the containers of mushroom fried rice, almond chicken, deep-fried won ton, for leftovers, while Winslow peered outside. The squad room's windows overlooked the street and she watched the traffic. Reesor had settled on a fortune cookie cracking it, reading the prediction on the ribbon: *You will find the truth if you keep seeking it.*

He shrugged, crunching on the cookie, passing the slip of paper to Winslow for her amusement, then answering his phone on the first ring.

“Homicide. Reesor.”

“It’s Fydor at the lab.”

“Anything new?”

“Yes, I think I’ve got something but it’s going to take me some time.”

“How long? You told me tonight.”

“Not tonight. Go home, I’ll call when I have it.”

“Come on.”

“Look, I’m jammed up. I’ve got to do more work on what we found at the movie theatre.”

“Well Fydor, can you give me a hint?”

A long, tense moment passed.

“I think your guy’s a traveler.”

THIRTY-NINE

At the Timberrock Hotel, snuggled in the sweet-scented alpine slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Banff, Alberta, Canada, Anna Clausner had been roused from a deep sleep by thudding and muffled cries coming from the adjacent room.

"This is unacceptable, Bill."

Her husband had also been awakened. "Give it a few minutes. It will stop."

Anna, a recently retired second violinist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, groaned. William Clausner, a historian specializing in sculpture at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, was an unusually patient man, but after several long moments, the noise had not subsided and he and his wife could no longer tolerate it.

The red digits on their luxury suite clock showed 3:07 A.M. William Clausner, blinked, rolled to his side, lifted the phone's handset on his night stand, squinted, then pressed the button for the front desk.

"Front desk. How may we help you?" said a young female voice.

"We have been awakened by a dreadful racket coming from the adjacent room to our right."

"We'll take care of it right away, Mr. Clausner."

Located at the base of Sulphur Mountain, the resort's design harmonizes with its surroundings. It's common to see deer and elk from your window, which opened to a majestic view of eternal alpine forests, jade-colored rivers and the snow-capped Rockies. Ever since Anna Clausner saw a travel special on CNN, it had been her dream to visit. But this tumult.

What the devil was going on in there?

Anna went to the bathroom for a sleeping pill. Bill had resumed reading his paperback thriller, a break from the art history texts he usually studied. He was exercising his usual consideration of using his tiny book light so as not to disturb his wife. Anna returned to bed, nestling her back to his, gazing through their large window at the mountain peaks, silhouetted against the sapphire night sky, coming to the conclusion that the splendor of the setting had gotten the better of passionate young lovebirds in the next room.

Eugene Vryke was in the next room.

Alone. Wrestling death.

He had been sleeping when it attacked. Charge after charge of pain

exploding in his brain, jolting him to the floor as he struggled to crush his pillow down his throat to silence his agony, groping in the darkness for his small plastic case of medication.

The vials. Injection. I need --

Don't cry out. Biting his tongue. Reaching, feeling the plastic case, tremoring, a spasm rocketing the case out of reach across the carpet to the bathroom. *No!* Vryke moaning, crawling, standing, supporting himself on the walls. Wild spasms kicking inside of his skull. *The case! Find the case!* Room spinning. Floor liquid. Catching himself on the counter, doorknob, toilet, tub, light switches, hands going everywhere. *The case! There!* Opening it. The gun-handled hypodermic. The vials blurring, hands trembling.

"At the advent of an episode, make an injection."

How could he do this? Was it too late? No. He squeezed the case. No. Please. Feeling the cold tiles of the bathroom floor. Sitting on the floor he was forcing his body between the tub and toilet, wedging himself, squeezing himself. His arms shaking. Pushing them tight between the porcelain, the needle glinting, quivering, against the tiny rubber membrane of the vial, cupping his hand over it, piercing the vial, drawing in the clear medication, concentrating hard to ensure the measure was accurate…

"You must not exceed it. To do so, would prove immediately fatal."

Did he know he was shouting now, pounding his head against the tub -- knocking at his door. Someone there.

"Sir? Is everything all right. Sir?"

Pulling his lips together, harnessing the pain, humming now, gripping the needle, moving it toward his skull

"Sir? Do you need anything?"

The needle touching his skin at the critical point behind his ear under his jawbone.

"Please open the door, sir."

The hypodermic flashing, quivering. His free hand rising to steady it, using all his strength to wedge himself to stillness.

"Relief should be instantaneous."

Holding his breath. Squeezing the handle in one rapid motion. The medication flowing cool in his veins. Water dousing an inferno. It was wonderful. Calming. Glorious. Inhaling, the oxygen relaxing his strained muscles, tension retreating.

Death defeated.

For now.

"Sir?"

Vryke slipped on a hotel robe bearing its insignia above the left breast. Without disengaging the security bar, he opened the door a crack.

A uniformed hotel staff member is standing in the carpeted hallway at the door. A red-haired man in his twenties. Neat brush cut. A fullback's neck. Strong muscular build. Height matching Vryke's.

"Sir." Voice courteous, low. His eyes taking the usual subtle stock of Vryke's scars. "We've had calls about a disturbance. Is there anything we can do for you?"

"No. Thank you. It's my sister, who dropped by to visit. She has epilepsy." Concern crept onto the younger man's face as he mentally repeated *epilepsy*. Vryke's voice is a whisper as he said, "She's had a spell, but she's fine now. Resting. I apologize for inconveniencing anyone."

"Would you like medical attention arranged, sir?"

"That won't be necessary. Wait." Vryke disappeared, then returned to pass a folded twenty dollar bill through the crack. "Thank you for your kind concern. We're fine."

The man closed his hand on the money. "Thank you, sir."

Vryke stayed at the door, hearing him pad down the hall to the elevator. Then he switched off his room lights and went to the cushioned chair he had placed before the windows. He sat in the dark, staring at the mountains, unable to sleep.

He set one of his computers on his lap, the screen glowing on his face. With a click he opened a hidden file. A clear video recording began with a tour of Belinda's empty apartment.

Then Belinda alone at the café, waiting, looking directly at the camera as it zooms in, tightening on her face, cutting away, then the swans gliding on the pond in the park, Belinda, alone on the bench, walking alone in the park, then to the theatre. Belinda is alone waiting for her order at the snack bar. Vryke is standing almost beside her, looking for chocolate covered almonds but touching and buying nothing. He turns to her, smiles, starting a conversation saying: *"I think Franco Zeffirelli's adaptation of the story is the best on film, don't you?"*

Surprised, Belinda turns to him, less than two feet away now. The microscopic camera lenses hidden in Vryke's thick-framed glasses capture her face while the pin-head-sized microphones record her voice, transmitting the data to his home-built miniature digital recording system in his shirt pocket.

"Yes." A smile. "It's very good."

"The world's favorite young star-crossed lovers."

The clerk is oblivious. Her boyfriend hates her new tattoo. She had been arguing with him on the phone, keeping them waiting.

"Yes." Belinda pays for her popcorn and soda, a tiny measure of unease rising.

Vryke knows he is a hideous stranger to her but she is a hurtful liar and he is fulfilling their destiny, resisting a sneer when he says wistfully, "Star-crossed lovers together forever in death. No one can interfere with destiny."

"I suppose." Belinda smiles, a drop of sadness in her eyes then leaves, vanishing into the darkness.

Vryke had taken his time, waiting before following her. The theater had

been empty. Just the two of them. The movie's title filled his laptop screen. Vryke had waited until the film began before taking a seat behind her without making a sound. Here now was a rear profile of Belinda weeping, her glistening face bathed in screen light, now a few seconds of Vryke's face, then a metallic flash, swift and terrible.

You were The One, Belinda. Destined to share eternity with me. But you betrayed me with a lie. Now you are alone forever. A hopeless romantic. A failed candidate. At least I gave you what you wanted. I ended your pain. Vryke closed the file and added it to the others.

He had been sloppy with Belinda. His condition was weakening his thinking. Immediately after their meeting in the theatre, Vryke checked out of his hotel to catch the next flight to anywhere. Leave as fast as possible. He had arrived at the airport, scanned the list of departures. *Calgary.* He had just enough time to purchase a full-fare ticket and board a direct flight. Good. It was his pattern to never return the same way he departed. Within several hours of meeting Belinda Holcomb, Vryke had been two time zones and half a continent away, driving a rented midsize sedan west toward the Rocky Mountains to Banff, where blending in with tourists from around the world would be easy. But the clock was ticking on him.

It was critical he return to the United States. He must slip back into America undetected. He had been remiss, was surely leaving a clear trail. He had always operated on the assumption that he *had* overlooked something. Because he was dying, he was fallible. But he knew that he was so far ahead of any police agency that he need not draw fire by intruding on their computer systems. As tempting as it would be, it would be a fatal move, for it would attract attention, more than he could handle right now. Tonight's convulsive event had underscored that. Once more, he had felt death's hot breath as its jaws opened to take him.

He had to get back to the U.S. safely. Vryke switched on the desk lamp to study his map. He had a plan. It was workable. He studied the sports and travel sections of the Vancouver newspapers, then his maps. He conducted more research on-line. If he took his time driving through the mountains to Vancouver, his plan would work and he would be back in the U.S. without a hitch. Forgiveness awaited him there.

She awaited to wash away his sins, purify his soul and accompany him into immortality.

Pure love can defeat any darkness.

Vryke clicked on the file containing the false ones. So many. He looked at their names, remembering their meetings, their faces, their eyes, and their lies. Vryke gazed to the night sky at the glittering constellations suspended over the mountains, adrenaline surging through him in the aftershock of his seizure.

A vision was coming.

His mind became a hallucinatory maelstrom. *Their faces.* The vision was

coming. *Record it. Capture the vision. They must know.* He reached for his leather bag, his anatomy dissecting kit, selecting the razor scalpel, slicing the fingertips of his right hand, his blood dripping as he raised his hand to the wall. *Capture the vision. Show them your destiny.* All those lonely lives lived in vain. Alas, now each of them would serve as the stars Vryke needed to write his eternal message in the heavens. Soon, very soon, every human being on earth would know his name.

Forever.

FORTY

In his San Francisco apartment, Wyatt did not hear the staccato hip-hop bass throbbing from the low riders prowling the Mission as night fell.

Laboring on his police laptop, he was consumed by Iris Wood's case, dissecting her Internet account information which he had obtained from her ISP. But it seemed everything he had tried over the last few days had dead-ended. At this point Wyatt was looking for any trace of communication in which someone tried to lure Iris Wood into a meeting, or a telephone call, or into revealing something personal, like a home or work address, financial information, anything threatening, harassing, an invitation to exchange graphic photographs or violent fantasies, or to have a sexual encounter. So far, Wyatt had found nothing like that in Iris Wood's travels.

What if our guy was smarter than your garden-variety head case?

She had employed scores of user names. He was finding a new one with every new site she had visited. He couldn't be sure he had all of them. The muscles in his neck were knotted now. His eyes were sore.

Was he even certain her killer was someone she had met on-line?

No.

The whole Internet angle was just another line of investigation. But until he had learned more about the on-line life Iris Wood had lived, or until Sydowski collared her killer, Wyatt could not let them rule it out. Or let Sydowski get in his way if he managed to pull something significant from her computer. Especially after her home system had wiped out his disk. What was up with that? He was counting on Gricks at the Livermore Lab. Maybe the old hippie would enlighten him on how to pursue the case, or give him some ideas on how to have another go at Iris Wood's PC. Maybe he should just ship it off to CART in San Diego, let the FBI perform surgery on the thing. Man, he could sure use some sort of lead on this.

At least Lieutenant Gonzales was keeping an open mind about it, telling Wyatt to keep going. Find whatever he could find. Or rule out what he could rule out. Sydowski seemed indifferent. Playing the hard-ass because of Reggie.

Wyatt got up, pulled a beer from his refrigerator, plopped on his sofa, catching the sirens and salsa music riding through the window on the cool breezes, remembering gunshots, the woman, the kid, Reggie shouting.

He had to make it right with Reggie. If it was the last thing he did.

Wyatt realized that it was the first time since the shooting that he had allowed that thought into his mind. Now he actually believed he was going to do it, actually felt strong enough to do it. Where was that coming from?

Olivia. It had to be her. The other night when she took his hand, after he had told her everything, it had felt right. After he put his cards on the table, laid out his sorry situation, she had told him, *"I believe you"*.

Wyatt swallowed some beer, almost smiling at the feeling that maybe Olivia had just lowered him a ladder so he could climb out of his dark pit. Boy, things had changed. Hey, he was going to her place for dinner --

Knocking on the door. Wyatt's eyes went to his gun in a lockbox on a dresser shelf. More knocking.

"Ben?" The male voice was familiar.

"Who is it?"

"Reed. Tom Reed."

Wyatt snapped the locks, half opening the door. "Why are you here?"

"May I come in?"

Wyatt glanced over Reed's shoulder at the cars on the street.

"I came alone, Ben, and in my own car. No billboards."

"What do you want?"

"A few minutes to talk."

"About?"

"Want to do this here, or can I come in? You might find this useful."

Reed had treated him fairly in the *Star's* reporting of Reggie's case. Then there was that one night, after his fiancée had moved out. Wyatt was drunk in some Tenderloin hellhole. Reed was there meeting some sleazoid source, had spotted Wyatt, seen what was happening. Reed had taken him out of the bar before damage was done. Taken him back to his apartment so he could sleep it off.

Wyatt figured he owed him for saving his ass that night. He surrendered the door. "Fine. Help yourself to a cold beer."

Reed took a soda from the fridge, popping the top, turning a kitchen chair backward, making an obvious gesture of noticing Wyatt's laptop.

"Did I interrupt some computer work there, Ben?"

"No. Why are you here?" Wyatt said from the sofa.

"Iris Wood. You're on her case."

"I am a member of the team on her case. I know nothing, and you know I don't leak. It's Sydowski's murder. He'll tell *you* more about it than he'll tell me and you know why."

"I figured as much. Friends of mine at the Hall tell me he's keeping you away from the action."

"Everybody has their assignments. It all goes on a need-to-know basis. I can't tell you anything."

"No, pal, I'm going to tell you something, Maybe you know it, maybe you don't, okay?"

"If it makes your day, go ahead."

"Did you know Walt is requesting details on similar unsolved homicides across the country? To me it looks like a traveler with a potentially huge body

count. I can see by your eyes that he didn't tell you because you're working on that 'need-to-know' basis."

"Where are you getting this?"

"I made a lot of calls. Lots of 'em. I don't need Sydowski's permission." Reed took a big swallow of soda. "I'm lucky that way."

"It's routine to look for common factors in similar unsolveds. Make queries. What you're telling me is standard."

"Sure. Right. Uh-huh. Talk to Bill Sample."

"Why? Who's he?"

"Phoenix homicide. The primary on an unsolved there. Elinor Snell, aged thirty-three, worked as a tax clerk for the state. Single, lonely. Found several months ago in the trunk of her car in a Phoenix mall parking lot. *The lid opened, as if she were on display.* From what I understand, Elinor Snell could have been Iris Wood's sister, lived the same kind of life, died the same kind of death. Loved her computer. Get where I'm going, Ben?"

"You talk to Sample?"

"Not yet."

"So where you getting this?"

"You know I don't give up sources. I made a lot of calls and have found a lot of fairly recent unsolved homicides similar to Iris Wood's." Reed pulled his notebook from his rear pocket, flipped through pages, reading. "Jen Schnieder in Dallas, Clay Farrell is the detective on her murder. Anita Erwin in Detroit, Lupe Vargas in Miami, Amy Finch in Cincinnati, Kathy Soran in Chicago, a few more."

"So why are you telling me this, Reed?"

"I've poked around. I think Sydowski's looking for something in most of these cases. You may know this, but I suspect he's got some key hold-back that could be a common denominator. You're a detective, you know what I'm talking about."

"I don't. Not specifically. It's routine to compare. So again, why are you telling me this?"

"Here's my theory. Iris Wood's murder is just too bizarre to be a stand-alone homicide. Her killer's out there. He's smart. He could be a cop, ex-cop, or poses as a cop. Whatever. I'm convinced there is something huge at work here. I've done some preliminary checking with a lot of sources across the country. I'm going to start digging, really digging. And if anyone wanted to help me further, well, I'd be willing to trade information they can't get, or might not be *assigned* to pursue."

Wyatt swallowed some beer. His eyes never leaving Reed's.

"Sooner or later, some reporter somewhere is going to bust this story wide open."

"And it just has to be you, Reed?"

"This story is already costing me. My wife is at the end of her rope with me. Zach, our son, has got some sort of allergy and the doctors can't tell us

what it is. It's creating some stress at home. She wants me to quit the paper. I just can't. My editor is Clyde Brader, remember him?"

"Asshole."

"Always been my rival. Never got over my Pulitzer nomination. Now he's my boss. Wants the pleasure of seeing me fail so he can fire me."

"So what are you trying to tell me, Reed, this is all personal for you?"

"Iris Wood's murder is my story. I am paying heavily for it and I ain't gonna lose it. I gotta go. " Reed snapped a page from his notebook listing the victims, placed it on Wyatt's kitchen table, then went to the door. "Like I said, I'm willing to trade, or 'discuss theories'. Thanks for hearing me out, Ben. See you around."

After Reed left, Wyatt studied the names on the torn strip of lined reporter's notebook paper. They were printed in Reed's neat script. Wyatt finished his beer and went on-line to the newspapers and information data banks, pulling up what public information he could on the cases. All were single women who lived quiet lives. All their bodies had been displayed in some fashion -- mannequin factory, open trunk, abandoned meat-processing plant. In some cases, the women were described as homebodies who spent time on-line. Wyatt thought. Was Sydowski comparing something? Did he have something?

Reed's list was a good list. It gave him something to work with. More than what Sydowski had given him. The cases on it fit with what happened to Iris Wood. It seemed Reed was on to something, had the inside track. Wyatt looked at the Phoenix case. Detective Bill Sample's name and telephone number were listed next to Elinor Snell.

Should he call him?

No. He had no authority. What if Sydowski *was* working a critical hold-back angle and found out? Given that Sydowski already wanted to take his head off, Wyatt thought, calling Phoenix would be an error.

Wait a minute.

The articles in the *Republic,* said Elinor had liked to chat on-line. He could try finding her friends on the Internet. He might be able to find an e-mail address for her. He could throw her e-mail address out there or search for it in some of the places where Iris Wood had traveled. What if Phoenix was doing something, or the FBI, or some other force? He had to be careful. Damned careful.

Wyatt's keyboard clicked as he began searching the Internet for a lead, any lead, into the cases of women murdered across the country.

FORTY-ONE

"I'm sorry, Officer Syd -- Syd-o-whiff --"

"Sid-dow-ski. Inspector Walt Sydowski."

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Dooley is still on another line. Would you like to leave a message, or continue holding?"

Evan Dooley was the vice president of passenger services for Five Star Skyways, headquartered in Miami. Dooley had promised to get back to Sydowski when the two men had first talked and Sydowski had made his request. Now Dooley was avoiding him. Sydowski's six subsequent calls to Miami had not been returned. He tightened his grip on his phone, refusing to hold a second longer.

"He knows why I am calling. I've been holding for five full minutes. I want you to get a piece of paper and write down the words: *urgent, homicide, police.* Go to him and hold it in front of his face."

"But sir, he knows you are calling I --"

"Please, right now. Please. Homicide."

"I'm just, he's, oh, he's clear. I'll transfer you"

The line clicked.

"Evan Dooley."

"This is Sydowski, San Francisco Homicide."

"Inspector, yes, I'm sorry."

"Got the lists?" Sydowski had called and faxed his request for complete passenger manifests for all Five Star Skyways flights to San Francisco originating, or connecting to Baltimore, for one week prior to the date Iris Wood was murdered.

"You wouldn't reveal the nature of the request."

"Police business."

"So you said. Yes, Inspector, after I got your request in writing, I passed it to our legal department. This concerns our corporate information, so I wanted to be certain everything was in accordance --"

"Mr. Dooley, are you going to give me the information? Or do we send a pissed off FBI agent over there with a subpoena?"

"We can FedEx the lists to you, fax them, whatever you like, Inspector."

"Both."

"We're talking about forty-two flights. That is going to be a lot of pages."

"My machine's loaded and ready."

"It'll take at least an hour to prepare."

"If I don't have them in that time, I'll call *my* legal department known as

the district attorney's office."

"That won't be necessary. I assure you we are cooperating, Inspector. I'm sorry for the delay. And if I can help you further, just call. Here are my cell and home phone numbers."

"I'll be in touch."

Sydowski slammed down his phone. That was an unprofessional performance. But to hell with it. He was doing his job. Dooley had been an arrogant, officious prick until Five Star's lawyers had told him to give up the lists.

Sitting at his desk at the Hall of Justice, Sydowski admitted he was in turmoil over Louise. He had left several messages on her cell phone and on her machine in San Jose. She had not returned his calls. He did not blame her. It was his doing. He had hurt her when she was just trying to help him. And she was right. He *was* feeling guilty about seeing Reggie haunting the streets like a ghost. Wyatt was a different story and he did not apologize for that. He let everything get tangled up in this case. And he had taken it out on Louise. Maybe he was afraid he was betraying his dead wife with Louise?

Just turn it off and get back to work. He studied the enlarged photographs of the shoe impressions and the tattered airport sticker: *BWI.* At least now he had a handle on the case. Something he could sink his teeth into. It was by no means conclusive. The shoe impressions went from the abduction point to the murder scene, which was usually the case in most homicides, tying a suspect to a crime scene. But that sort of thing usually comes *after* a suspect is identified. The added find of the BWI sticker and fibers was like finding a winning lottery ticket. The odds were astronomical. They had to capitalize on it, work it to their maximum advantage in their pursuit before they could cash it in. What they had was strong enough to stand up in court. It was hard physical evidence, but it was only a beginning.

He popped a Tums into his mouth, grimacing as he crunched, his gut lurching, images of the case blurring in his mind, hanging his fury on a single thought for the killer.

We're gaining on you.

Sydowski checked his watch. Turgeon was following up on the shoe and should be back. He glanced at the fax machine. Still no action. He tried Louise's cell again.

"You've reached Louise. Please leave me a message."

"Louise, it's Walt. I was a jerk. Please call."

"That's so romantic. Every woman wishes for a call like that." Turgeon had returned from Hunter's Point with a file.

"Anything more on the shoe stuff?"

"So far Horace has narrowed it being manufactured in the Caribbean, he thinks by a subsidiary of a U.S.-German multinational. He's still working on it with the FBI and gave me some numbers we could try."

The fax machine near Sydowski began humming, giving birth to a page

with the Five Star Skyways logo.

"Here we go," Sydowski said.

Lieutenant Gonzales had a line of sight on the fax machine and stepped from his office when he saw it churning out pages. He picked up a few pages. Sydowski did the same. The lists seemed endless.

"We're looking for a needle in a big haystack, Walt."

"Leo, until Horace did what he did, we didn't even have a haystack."

"Let's just hope he's in there."

"Horace is doing more work on the shoe and fibers seeing if he can match it with rental car models. His first go on the car fibers is not consistent with the weight of carpet in police cars."

"All right, Walt. Get on this list. Records has got four bodies and some interns standing by for computer checks, any way you want. I got two fresh bodies from General Works ready to make calls. We'll send everybody what you need when you're set."

They had requested a week's worth of flights on Horace's recommendation, which he had based on the condition of the BWI sticker. Few people knew this line of the investigation, that it was an extremely calculated guess that the killer ever set foot in Baltimore's airport. The sticker could have been transferred to his shoe from anywhere. But the shoe impressions were solid evidence, and BWI was a lead, the best lead they had.

The complete lists totalled some 2,769 names.

Sydowski was relieved that Five Star Skyways had provided first and last names and contact telephone numbers, which passengers provide so they can be notified for flight delays or other information.

Over the next few days, Sydowski and Turgeon reduced the list to some 1,400 names that were male or neutral, like Chris or Dale. The records people began running them through the California records working with the driver's license bureau and the DMVs of Maryland, the District of Columbia, Delaware, Virginia and Pennsylvania, crosschecking telephone area codes or numbers in case a person with a common name surfaced in all jurisdictions. In most cases, the drivers' records checks gave dates of birth and photographs, which further reduced the list. Slim, the drug addict thief, insisted the suspect he saw was white, about six feet aged twenty to forty. Using those shaky tolerances, Sydowski had the records people reduce the list further. Sydowski had the two general assignment people run that list against the employee lists of American Federated Insurance and their policyholders lists, in case there was any link to Iris Wood. Despite everyone's hard work and the reductions, it was going to take more time.

Sydowski knew they needed another break to take that haystack down while Turgeon continued pressing him to submit the case to VICAP.

"Walt, this could all be futile. Our guy might not ever have been on this

airline, or he might have used a stolen card, or paid cash, or given a false name. You know that."

Sydowski knew that. He also knew to trust his instincts, stay the course. Keep the faith.

FORTY-TWO

Some twenty-eight hundred miles east in Toronto, Reesor and Winslow were rolling from a coffee stop at a McDonald's drive-through when Reesor's pager went off.

"It's the mad Russian. Wants us to come to the lab now."

"Finally," Winslow said. "That guy doesn't hurry for anybody."

The Toronto Police Service crime lab was in the west end on Jane Street near the 401. They took Weston to Black Creek. Traffic was moving well. Reesor enjoyed his coffee.

"The Boston Red Sox are in town next week. If we get a break, I'll take my boy."

Winslow smiled as she passed slower cars.

At the movie theater where Belinda Holcomb's body had been found, the lead hand from the scenes-of-crime section was Fydor Petrov, a forensic identification specialist, who headed a team of investigators to collect and study the physical evidence. He was a wiry, soft-spoken marathoner who wore rimless glasses and short-cropped blond hair. He produced impeccable scene work and analyses that always withstood the most formidable challenges in court. He was hunched over his microscope when Reesor and Winslow arrived.

"You made good time." Fydor slid from his stool "This way please."

He led them to a large board with several enlarged prints of shoe impressions neatly posted on it. "These are unknown footwear impressions collected at the movie theater from the floor area of the seat immediately behind the victim. Given their condition, and trace of bloodstain, I conclude they were made by the killer." He said the hard smooth floor with its polished surface was excellent for receiving shoe impressions. "The surface, sticky from spilled drinks, worked well to take an impression, especially when the killer stood behind the victim pressing his weight into the floor."

"I don't see a brand or logo," Reesor said.

"No. No lettering, digits, motifs, or words to indicate any sort of manufacture or compound code. Not to worry."

"I don't follow."

"The impressions are good. The cuts and wear characteristics make the shoe fairly unique. The edges have channeling, with an array of lugs and polygons, indicating hiking, outdoors, or possibly cross-training footwear. By my measurements and calculations, I am guessing a U.S.-North American size eleven. Men's."

Fydor had consulted reference books, computer data banks, and had

estimated there were some one hundred footwear manufacturers, outsole producers, importers, and exporters who might know this impression.

"I've reproduced a black-ink sketch of the impression and will contact each company with it to see if they recognize it."

Reesor made notes. Winslow stepped closer to the photographs, studying the impressions.

"I will show you something critical, something remarkable." Fydor led the detectives to a computer monitor. "This took me quite a lot of time." The computer's screen displayed a dirty white item; a nearly black, frayed, torn, rag-like fragment resembling paper.

"What is it? I can't make anything out." Winslow squinted. "Just looks like a scrap of rag, or tissue."

Fydor adjusted the equipment, the backlighting and hue changing until a faded block letter emerged showing a *B.*

"This is a tattered strip of sticker tag from an airport, representing the airport code. I've seen this style of item before in a drug-smuggling case where we came upon a luggage tag from LAX. I believe that what we've retrieved is a fragment of a miniature ribbon repeater portion torn from a sticker code tag. Likely balled up in the footwear pattern and loosened when the tread was spread as the killer shifted his weight standing to strike, allowing the sticky floor to dislodge it."

Fydor continued adjusting until next to the *B,* to the right of it, another character letter, or piece of one, emerged. It appeared to be the stick or beginning of another character. The letter *I.* But the torn and worn condition of the paper made it lean back, touching the top of the *B.*

"It could be an *I* or the beginning of the letter *W* or *U,* even a *V.*

Reesor focussed on the characters, sketching them in his notebook. "You'll give us a printout of this?"

"Certainly."

"Airport codes. It's good work, Fydor. Excellent. But there must be endless possibilities as to which one the tag is from."

"There are nine."

"Nine?"

"Most are in the U.S. I checked with several international databases, including the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration."

"Nine? You know which ones?"

Fydor reached for a slim yellow file folder and produced a single sheet of paper for Reesor. Winslow read along with him.

BUF BUFFALO, NY
BUR BURBANK, CA
BWI BALTIMORE, MD
ABI ABILENE, TX
BIL BILLINGS, MT

PBI WEST PALM BEACH, FL
BIM BIMINI, BAHAMAS
BUE BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA
BUH BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

Fydor's pen tapped the list. "I draw your attention to where the *B* meets the next letter. Those are your possibilities."

In the car, on the way to headquarters, Reesor inventoried everything they had on Belinda Holcomb's murder. Fydor's work took it all in a new direction, suggesting the killer may be from out of town. Then, there were all the newspapers in her apartment. All had large personal sections. *Was she meeting a blind date? Someone on-line? Did he set her up, see her at the café? Follow her to the movie? Or was he just there? A psycho in the dark?*

Reesor pulled out his notebook, reviewing the folded list of airport codes and corresponding cities.

"This one's just giving me a weird vibe, Jackie. I can't explain it. With this list, our guy could be from anywhere. I think we should throw everything out there now. Locally, we can still work it hard. I just don't think our guy lives around here at all. What do you think?"

"She was a woman acting like she was supposed to meet someone in a public place. A few hours later she goes to see a romantic movie. Fydor says the guy behind her is mobile. I agree, we should get this all out there."

Reesor picked up a slip of paper that had fallen from his pocket.

"When we get back, we'll talk to the boss. I want to complete the book, get BAS to go over it, get it to Orillia and the RCMP in Ottawa. Maybe they can work the list with the FBI in Quantico."

Reesor unfolded the little strip of paper, then chuckled. It was the prediction from his fortune cookie.

You will find the truth if you keep seeking it.

FORTY-THREE

"Las Vegas?" Ann repeated, staring at Reed. "You have to go to Las Vegas tonight?"

They had just finished eating Ann's homemade tacos.

"No. Sacramento tonight. After I'm done there, I'll fly to Las Vegas."

Reed began clearing their dinner dishes. He had gotten home early enough for his family to eat together, which didn't happen often.

"Dad's going to prison," Zach said just as their doorbell chimed. "I'll get it!"

"Prison?" Ann said.

"Folsom."

"Folsom?" She kept an eye on Zach at the door down the hallway while loading dishes into the dishwasher. "Why are you going there?"

"To interview Donnie Ray Ball. Remember him? The detective who was convicted of robbing banks in the Bay Area. I wrote about him. Then I'll go directly to Las Vegas for another part of the story."

"This is all for the bride murder story?"

"Yes." He passed her a plate.

"Dad!" Zach called from the door. "Somebody's here for you!"

It was a woman from the rental company, delivering Reed's car. A blue midsize Chrysler. Reed signed the agreement on her clipboard, accepted the keys. She got into a waiting company van. Zach loved Reed's shiny rental.

"Awesome, Dad. Can we go for a little ride?"

"Sorry, son. We don't have time right now."

Ann was tidying the kitchen, shutting cupboard doors a bit harder than necessary.

"Dad, remember last time you went to a prison, I think it was San Quentin, you went to their store where they sell stuff and got me the wooden stage coach a bad guy made?"

"Sure."

"Can you see if they have anything like that at Folsom?"

"Zach, no!" Ann interjected. "That was a long time ago. *Before 'you-know-what' happened.* Dad won't have time for gifts. Go brush your teeth."

When they were alone Reed said, "Ann, Brader is sending me. It's not like I have a choice."

"You could always quit. Write your books."

"Ann."

"Tom, please don't get him anything from Folsom. Or whoever you're going to see in Las Vegas. Nothing. Not after everything he's been through."

"Sure, I understand."

The cutlery jingled when she shut the dishwasher door. She stared into his eyes. "Tom. I'm sorry. It just worries me whenever you throw yourself into stories like this."

"I know. But it's my job, Ann. It's what I do."

"Will you be back in time for my banquet?"

"Banquet?"

She tapped the laminated calendar affixed to the refrigerator with flowered magnets. He saw the notation in her handwriting for the annual Bay Area women's business event. It was in a few days.

"I should be back in time."

"That would be nice."

"Ann."

"Are you packed?"

It could have been worse with Ann, Reed figured as the Chrysler glided across the Bay Bridge and beyond the Bay Area, eating up the asphalt of Interstate 80 to the capital, Pink Floyd pumping from the sound system.

It helped that he had eventually obtained a very detailed list of materials the contractors had used in renovating their house. That had pleased Ann, ending his banishment to the sofa bed in his office. But the doctors still couldn't unravel the mystery of Zach's illness. They needed more time for more tests.

Reed mulled over the real reason he had to leave town. Brader, the misguided fool, was still hot for a "contextual bride murder feature" on why cops go bad. He demanded Reed request an interview with Donnie Ray Ball in Folsom. Reed made the request and Ball had agreed. Then Reed had told Brader that in addition to the prison interview, he had discovered that the answer to how bad cop Donnie Ray Ball went bad was in Las Vegas. Donnie had family there that no one had discovered, *"and,"* Reed had told Brader, *"I think they have a story to tell."*

Brader had approved the trip.

But Las Vegas was a lie. Reed blinked at the muted TV of his second-floor room at a Motel 6 in southeast Sacramento. It was true that he needed to go to Las Vegas. But it had nothing to do with his early morning prison interview with Donnie Ray Ball. It was about the bigger story. Iris Wood's murder. Reed believed he had a solid lead on her killer.

They call it New Folsom because it was built next to the original. California State Prison, Sacramento, as it is officially known, sits on some 1,200 acres in the eastern portion of Sacramento County within the city of Folsom in an area called Represa.

Donnie Ray Ball, a muscular red-haired Irish American, who had robbed thirty banks, was among the nearly 3,000 inmates housed at Folsom in a Level IV, maximum security facility. These days the former detective was surviving on C Yard. He met Reed in a visitor's room, dressed in prison-issue jeans, T-shirt, shoes. During the one-hour interview he revealed little, insisting that Reed report "how it was drugs, all drugs, that made me mess up bad." That had to be made clear in the story because Ball's first parole hearing was approaching. When the interview ended, Ball asked Reed to consider collaborating on a screenplay, about a bad detective.

Later while waiting for his flight at Sacramento International, Reed opened his laptop to transcribe the tape and begin writing the feature. At one point in the interview, Ball, who was a county homicide detective before he turned bank robber, was confident a real cop did not stop Iris Wood at Stern Grove. "It's all too messy. Sure, I was usually stoned when I did my crimes, but this murder is calculated, planned. A cop would know about trace, about unit logs for unmarked cars. No way was that a real cop. The guy was posing, because how else is he going to stop a woman alone at night?"

FORTY-FOUR

Reed had written nearly half of his story on Donnie Ray Ball by the time his jet connection, crammed with high rollers from Portland, landed in Las Vegas at McCarran International Airport.

It was scorching in the lot where he picked up his rental, a Neon. The illicit element of the trip to Nevada underscored its urgency. Before driving off, Reed let the air conditioner do its work as he stripped off his damp shirt, pulled on a fresh one, then punched a local number on his cell phone.

"Hello," a woman answered.

"Mrs. Purcell? Carla's mother?" Reed turned the A/C fan down.

"Yes."

"Hi, it's Tom Reed from San Francisco."

"Oh yes."

"I just arrived. I'm at the airport. I'd like to drop by now, if this is a good time?"

"Now is fine, Mr. Reed. I'll give you directions."

Reed began unfolding his crisp new map of Las Vegas, snapped off the cap from his pen, and traced a route to the new suburb where Mrs. Purcell had promised to tell him of her daughter's murder.

Pulling from the lot, he switched on the radio and heard Johnny Cash singing "Ring of Fire" as he drove the streets of Las Vegas, reflecting on what he knew about Carla Purcell's case.

She had been a thirty-four-year-old woman who lived alone in a quiet apartment building. She had worked at a day care looking after the young children of mostly single mothers employed as showgirls, dealers, waitresses, and bartenders. A year ago, after attending an evening community meeting, she never made it home. Six days later, her compact car was discovered at the western edge of Las Vegas at a strip mall storage site that had single-garage-size units. Her car was empty. Her body was found in a church nearby, according to what Reed picked up from reports in the *Review-Journal.*

Reed had learned from Roland Snell in Arizona that the Phoenix homicide detective on his daughter's case had let slip that the FBI and Las Vegas Metro police had considered the Purcell file in Nevada as having a possible link to the Phoenix murder.

Reed located and contacted Carla's mother, Darlene Purcell, a short time ago. Yes, she confirmed, Las Vegas homicide detectives had told her recently that they were optimistic about a potential lead on her daughter's case out of Phoenix, which Reed suspected stemmed from San Francisco. She agreed to meet Reed, to trade information.

The guard at the booth of the gated community where Darlene Purcell lived was expecting Reed. He checked his ID, then cleared Reed's entrance with a polite salute and directions to her home. It was a picture-perfect bungalow, shaded by desert fan palms. Darlene Purcell was in her late sixties, a white-haired, obese woman with a waxen face and a breathing condition. She wore a tent dress, walked with a cane, and used a wheeled oxygen tank with a slender clear hose affixed to her nostrils, as if she were a hospital patient. A colorful budgie in an ornate cage in the kitchen chirped a greeting from its swing.

"I see Lulu's happy you're here. Thank you for coming, Mr. Reed." She tottered into her cozy living room, inviting Reed to sit in a large cushioned chair.

"Thank you for seeing me," Reed said.

She positioned herself over the sofa, lowered herself, sighing as she sank into it. "Have you talked to Hank Fiero? He's the detective on my girl's case."

"No, ma'am. At this point --"

"Call me Darlene, Tom."

"No Darlene, not yet."

"Well now, seeing how you came all this way, how can I help you?"

Talking to her, Reed was amazed at her warmth toward him. He noticed silver-and gold-framed photographs of Carla on the TV stand shelf, next to ceramic figurines on doilies and a picture of a young soldier, Carla's father. He had died in Vietnam when Carla was little. She'd had no other relatives.

"My girl found out early on she couldn't have kids, Tom. Never really had a boyfriend. Carla had a little speech impediment. She was very quiet. For a few years she considered becoming a nun. She was a churchgoer. Worked cleaning hotel rooms on the strip. Then she got the job at the day care. The kids there meant everything to her. So did her volunteer work."

"What sort of volunteer work?"

"With her church's anti-death-penalty group."

"That was not in the *Review-Journal."*

"Fiero asked me and the church to keep quiet about that, keep it out of the papers."

"Why?"

"In case her murder was connected to her volunteer work to abolish Nevada's death penalty. She was part of some research the church helped with on a specific case.

"Which case?"

"Chad Kyle Snow."

Reed was familiar with it. "He was exonerated."

"He was on death row, always said he was innocent. Carla's group took up his case; then the DNA proved he didn't do it."

"I remember."

"That was about two years back, maybe longer. She used to go with the

group up to Ely, go to the prison. They prayed for him."

"You think it was connected to her murder, Darlene?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Police ever say much on that possibility?"

"Not really."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

"Well, Carla was pretty good on her computer. The detectives looked at it, but they told me it wasn't working all that good. She never mentioned that to me. I guess it worked well enough for her."

"What do you mean?"

"She used it to go on-line about death penalty stuff and she also told me it was a good way to not worry about her speech and sort of meet new people."

"She had on-line friends."

"Lots."

"She ever go meet any of them face-to-face?"

"No. She was so shy about her speech. Very private. In some ways I think she, I won't say *liked,* but *preferred* living alone. That way at least she did not have to face people stumbling over her words. But I think she ached to have a family."

"Darlene, this could be hard, but it might help my research. Did the police or the coroner ever tell you details of her death?"

Tears welled in her eyes. She closed them and nodded. "Hank Fiero told me never to tell anyone this, said they needed it to catch him. Tom, please don't print it until then. Promise me you won't."

Reed promised.

"You know she was found in the church, but it was never published about how she was found." She paused to breathe. "He laid her in the arms of a statue, a full-sized copy of Michelangelo's *Pieta.* "Oh Lord, I still have dreams about holding her in my arms when she was my baby girl."

Reed moved near her and patted her knee as Lulu chirped from the kitchen.

After several moments, Darlene collected herself. "I've got some reports the police gave me for insurance, Tom. Her death certificate, the Clark County coroner's report, and some other things I kept from her apartment and things they released to me. You're welcome to see them."

She directed Reed to an empty room filled with boxes of clothing, books, kitchenware. All were simply marked, CARLA and another folder with documents and a note from Detective Hank Fiero, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police. Actually there were several files, thick with standard letter-size sheets as if they had been professionally copied.

Darlene: I've talked to powers that be and decided to copy and give to you things of Carla's we can release, or no longer need. Hank.

Reed sat on the floor and went through everything, flipping first through

the files from the police. They looked rather innocuous, stuff about abolishing the death penalty, prayers, poems, her own collected papers, letters, notes. Several files, almost as thick as the Las Vegas yellow pages.

"Anything there like your case in San Francisco, Tom?" Darlene was leaning on her cane at the doorway. She was wearing a robe. Reed had not realized night had fallen. It was late.

"I lost track of time." Reed looked at his watch. "I am sorry. I better go. I have to get a room and catch an early morning plane."

"Tom, take whatever you need with you. Take a good look at it in California, then send it back to me. I trust you with it."

"Thank you. For everything. Reading some of her letters here, I can understand she was a very loving person."

"I think she had something special. She always believed in forgiveness. I think she even forgave God for making it so she couldn't have kids. But I'll never forgive Him for making the man who took her from me. I hope they find him, Tom, so he can pay for what he did to my girl."

Reed checked into a Holiday Inn, ordered a club sandwich from room service, and studied the massive paper file. He supported his back with pillows, with the file folder on his chest. He began reading every document. He battled exhaustion from a day that began in Folsom Prison and ended in Las Vegas with Carla Purcell's innermost thoughts running through his mind. Sleep swept over him as he gripped a page that had no detective or date stamp from the LVMP. Maybe it got in the file by mistake? Or was overlooked. Or misplaced? Reed yawned. His eyes closed. Man he was wiped out. He tried to concentrate on the page. It had anti-death-penalty stuff on one side. She appeared to be using recycled paper, because on the other side there appeared to be Carla's printout of an old e-mail exchange she had saved from a lonely heart she met on a chat room.

Dear CP:

I just have to know, if you found the right man, could you forgive him the sins of his past life?

FORTY-FIVE

Vryke heard the wail of the siren, saw the flashing red lights in his rear-view mirror, and shifted his grip on the wheel.

His right foot spasmed on the gas pedal. Instinct urged him to flee. But he reconsidered, pulled his rented car off of the road. The unmarked police cruiser inched up behind him, its radio crackling in the tranquil mountain air. Vryke swallowed hard. Hands visible on the wheel. *Stay calm.* It was pretty here. The sun was setting. He studied his rear-view mirror. A young cop in his cruiser. Talking on his radio. Calling in the plate of Vryke's rental.

Easy. Take it easy.

The cop was listening, waiting for a radio response. Vryke had left his hotel in Banff earlier that day, deciding to go east to Highway 22, then south on the ribbon of road that parallels Alberta's Rockies. He then went west, taking the Crowsnest Pass, which becomes Highway 3, the breathtaking southern route across British Columbia that threads through the mountains and stays close to the U.S. border. He had just entered British Columbia when this cop materialized from nowhere. Now he was stepping from his cruiser, adjusting his cap, approaching Vryke's car.

"Evening, sir."

The officer was in his late twenties. Six feet. Athletic. Dressed in navy pants with a wide yellow seam stripe, a khaki shirt, and over it, a blue kevlar vest. A brass name plate reading: CONST. ALLAN KRELL. Vryke noticed the gun holstered in his leather utility belt. He could see from his shoulder patch the letters *RCMP GRC.* Beneath the brim of his cap, the Mountie had quick, intelligent eyes that met Vryke's. Not even a flicker at his scars.

"Hello, Officer."

"Could you turn the ignition off, please."

Vryke did.

"Where you headed?"

"Vancouver. Is there a problem?"

"Did you just come from Alberta?"

Vryke nodded, noticing the cop's gold wedding band.

"The speed limit changes when you enter B.C."

"Oh, I'm from the U.S., I didn't know."

"That milesto-kilometers thing can trip you up." A white-toothed smiled. "Sir, I'm going to need your driver's license and registration, please."

Driver's license. Vryke's pulse quickened. He had his authentic Maryland license. The several fake ones he used for his mission were hidden in the lining of his luggage, in the trunk.

"Sir. Your license and registration, please?"

"Sorry. Long day. The car's a rental."

"Should be in the glove compartment, or on the visor. I'd like to see the rental contract as well, please."

Vryke found the rental agency's registration, realizing the rental agreement was in yet another false name. He hadn't prepared for this scenario. He passed the registration along with his actual license to the officer.

The Mountie unfolded the agreement, looked at Vryke's license. "Who rented this vehicle?"

"A friend."

"It lists only one insured driver. Where's your friend?"

"He had to fly ahead. I'm going to meet him in Vancouver." *Careful not too much information. Liars give too much information.*

The Mountie was thinking. "Sir you have the right to refuse, but would you mind opening your trunk for me?"

The saliva in Vryke's mouth dried. Open the trunk? *Don't hesitate. Cooperate.* "I don't mind." He popped the latch.

The officer stepped around to take a look at the luggage and computer bags. *Oh, Jesus!* The luggage tags! Did they match his license or the rental contract? Vryke's mind raced.

Thud! The trunk closed.

"Be right back, sir." The Mountie returned to his cruiser.

Vryke studied his mirror, reading every tick and reaction on the Mountie's face. The cop radioed Vryke's data to his police dispatcher, who would run it through the CPIC, the Canadian Police Information Center, which provides data on crimes, criminals, and alerts. *Do not turn around. He could have a camera going.* It sounded like a female dispatcher from the radio conversation spilling into the still twilight. Vryke saw the Mountie smile at a shared joke. Then he wrote something on his clipboard. Should he run? Vryke distinctly heard the dispatcher say, "…no hits, Al."

The Mountie returned. Gave Vryke his documents.

"I'm just going to caution you to watch the posted speed and your speedometer, sir. It measures miles and kilometers."

"No ticket?"

"We'll save it for next time." The Mountie smiled, returned to his cruiser, killed his lights, and roared off.

Vryke sat for several minutes before starting his car and driving for a few more hours.

Outside of some hamlet, he checked into a motel that was nearly hidden in the alpine mountain forest. He called Vancouver to confirm the arrangements which would help him enter the U.S. It wouldn't be much longer, he thought in the shower, the hot water melting tension from his close

call with the cop.

Later he found solace in his computers, his visions, and the woman awaiting him. Eternity with her would be magnificent, he thought, caressing her words to him.

Pure love can defeat any darkness.

FORTY-SIX

A million little worries were working overtime, keeping Olivia up. Did she have everything for the dinner she was making for Ben? Yes. She was flying to Chicago soon to see her relatives. Did she forget anything? Reservation? Ticket? That was it. She had forgotten to buy her ticket.

She would take care of it now. Put her mind at ease. Otherwise, she would be awake all night.

Olivia sighed. Sat up. Her feet found her slippers. She padded down the stairs in darkness, the ticking grandfather clock keeping her company as she went to the kitchen. She warmed some milk for hot cocoa to help her sleep, grabbed her purse, returned to her bedroom, switched on her computer.

Sipping her cocoa, she logged on to the airline's secure site and felt into her purse for her wallet and credit card. Maybe she could get a deal. She reviewed the schedule of flights to Chicago, selected the times she wanted for departure and return, requested a window seat, entered her credit card number, name, telephone address. Destination contacts in case her luggage was lost. In a short time she was finished and relieved. But not yet drowsy.

Sitting before her monitor, warm mug in her hands, Olivia thought of her aunt's voice, her smile, so much like her mother's. She thought of how good it was going to be to visit her, her uncle, her cousin. Her *family.*

Olivia thought of Ben. How she liked being with him. They got together whenever they could, to go to restaurants, a movie, a jazz club, a walk. It felt good. She no longer counted their dates. When he came for dinner, it would be her first time making a meal for him. She was a good cook, everything should be fine. But there was something else about his upcoming visit. Olivia lost herself in his handsome face, his deep voice, broad shoulders; how his strong hands felt so good when he took her in his arms to kiss her good night. She loved his long, soft kisses. They left her desiring more. But she wasn't ready and Ben never pushed things. He was gentle, patient, letting their relationship follow its own rhythm.

Olivia looked upon her bed, her hand caressing her neck, thinking of his soft eyes, the pain hidden deep behind them over his partner's shooting. Ben's tragedy weighed heavily on her heart. Maybe she could help him come to terms with it. Resolve it, lessen the sorrow he carried. She believed he was telling the truth about what had happened that terrible day, but she knew nothing more of the case. After Ben had told her about it, he never spoke of it again.

Olivia's keyboard began clicking as she called up the Web sites for the Bay Area's major papers, to search their archives. She submitted her credit

card number, then entered the terms *Ben Wyatt police.* She found nearly two dozen articles of varying length about the incident. If she knew more about what had happened to Ben and his partner, she would have a better understanding of what he was going through. Then she could help him.

The printer hummed.

The way the traffic hummed that night on the bridge when she stood at the edge of her world, ready to step from it.

But she hung on. Somehow and for some reason she had been saved. Her life had purpose. She had connected with her family. She had Ben and she could help him, as she could help the others who had helped her.

Olivia peered into her computer monitor, thinking of the very people who had encouraged her. She owed them. If she could help just one. Her keyboard clicked and she went on-line to her regular message boards and Internet e-mail.

Where was that guy who seemed to be hurting? Olivia hadn't heard from him in a while. He'd been hurt deeply by someone. She searched her messages from her cyber-friends, site after site, until she found an e-mail address for him.

Olivia scrolled through their history. How did he put it in his latest plea? Ah, here it was: *Is there really anyone out there who can truly forgive the sins of a past life?*

Olivia began a new message to him.

FORTY-SEVEN

The Dead Horse Bar was an East Bay dive near the edge of Berkeley, a few blocks into Oakland. Far from the hill dwellers and mall crawlers, it rose from a forgotten corner, white mortar stains running down its cracked weatherworn bricks, its windows painted over and barred. A growling air conditioner bleeding rust-colored water over a dented metal door punctured by several bullet holes dared you to enter. A Harley backfired, sounding like a gunshot, sparking Wyatt's nerves for half a second.

If he had had any doubts Gricks wanted to meet here, they ended when he spotted his lime-green VW beetle parked in the littered lot. Inside, Wyatt removed his sunglasses, his eyes adjusting quickly to the darkness, his nose assaulted by the smell of beer and many unpleasant things. The requisite large TVs were muted on the ball game over a wooden horseshoe-shaped bar. Some sorry-looking souls atop swivel-seat stools. One guy looked legless. The main floor had an assortment of saloon-style wooden chairs, tables and a jukebox. Along the walls, high-backed booths offered privacy. Gricks waved to him from a dark one in the back, where he was talking on his cell phone.

Wyatt ordered a Coors from the bartender, a tall man with a pock-marked face, greased back hair. Prison tattoos on his forearms. He set the bottle on the bar for Wyatt, who left a few bills.

"Thanks. Keep the change."

The bartender's head nodded slightly. No smiles.

Gricks finished his call. "My father lives in Berkeley. Retired professor. Nuclear physics. Got Alzheimer's now. I try to see him as often as I can. This place is on my way."

"Nice joint. Must really cheer you up."

Gricks and his thoughts were elsewhere. He took a hit of his beer, then tugged thoughtfully at his beard.

"So what can you tell me, Randy?"

Gricks continued stroking his beard. "We're just two guys talking at a bar."

"Yes."

"I am in a very difficult position because of my job at the lab. National security laws. You have to understand. I could find myself in a shit storm, major shit storm, because I have not been cleared to consult."

"Makes two of us. We never had this conversation."

"All right."

"So tell me what you think happened to my disk."

"Well, I stayed late a few nights working on it, that's why I called you in

the wee hours. Sorry."

"Can we get to it, please?"

"I'm going to tell you a story. Think of it as possibly hypothetical."

"Possibly hypothetical."

"Remember years ago, it still happens, but years ago when the first sensational stories surfaced of how computer hackers were intruding into defense computer networks, major civil grid networks?"

"Sure, the kids and Pentagon stuff. There were movies."

"Yeah, well, not long after that, the U.S. government initiated a highly classified computer defense strategy. At that time, I was with NSA working on developing Intelink, one of the government's most secure communications networks. The CIA uses it and it's linked to the White House. Then I got pulled from Intelink to a special program."

"What was it?"

"It was called INFERNO. Back then, it was feared that our most sensitive computer systems, those critical to the security, the very survival of the nation, were vulnerable to intrusion, attack, and destruction by foreign governments hostile to the U.S. or terrorist groups."

"Or teenagers alone in their bedrooms."

"Well, once it was clear that hacking in was child's play, many computer security systems emerged around the world in industry and governments. But INFERNO was unlike anything ever conceived. It was so secret and powerful it didn't exist, really. It's an ongoing process, developed in some secret buildings near Fort Meade, Maryland, with the best computer minds from the CIA, NSA, Defense, the industry, you name it. All working on a classified project aimed at defending America's most vital computer systems from penetration. But it had many other aspects. Some might alarm people."

"Such as?"

"It attempted to secretly link, for monitoring, every form of telecommunications, telephones, computers, radios, for the security of the nation."

"Sounds like a sword, not a shield."

"There were those in the program who had Big Brother concerns. Keep in mind Y2K was coming. A million nightmares could have been unleashed."

"I'll bet."

"But imagine a scenario where someone could override our nuclear missile command strategy and hold the world hostage? Or crash planes, or cause the world's nuclear plants to malfunction?"

"That's possible?"

"Anything's possible, Ben. Still is. We're only human. Under INFERNO, the goal was to create the world's ultimate computer and telecommunications emergency security system, to safeguard our most important computer systems from intrusion and attack."

"When was INFERNO being developed?"

"At the dawn of the Internet. Some top-level security types envisioned what could happen."

"What kinds of things did INFERNO unleash?"

"We were developing abilities whereby a period or the dot on a letter *i* could trigger a monitoring system on all computer systems, even those off-line if they were within a thousand yards of a telephone, radio, or television. We were developing programs whereby everyday phrases, like 'hello' and 'hi', and a digit on the keypad, could activate monitoring of any telephone conversation, land line or cellular. These were the precursors to sniffers and the FBI's carnivore program. They evolved from some of the early work the CIA and NSA developed in the Cold War era. You know, word recognition, character recognition. And we had developed the technology of reverse TV and radio whereby viewers and listeners could be viewed or heard through INFERNO."

"You're talking about anyone, anywhere, any time?"

Gricks nodded. "We're talking about someone plotting to harm the nation, murder the nation, unleash weapons of mass destruction."

"You worked on such things?"

"Hypothetically speaking, yes. I was there when we conducted theoretical field tests on some aspects. Believe me, they worked. Hypothetically."

"I don't understand the grand plan. How would you get the INFERNO system installed? Tap every TV, radio, and phone in America?"

Gricks was silent. He had finished his beer. He declined another from the bartender. So did Wyatt.

"This is hypothetical?"

"Sure, Randy, we're developing a movie."

"Federal legislation would be drafted to have computer, radio, telephone and television makers install certain frequency ranges, or components, or some specifications. It would also require imports to do the same, under new U.S. telecommunications law, et cetera. INFERNO's people could activate the program at the security end. But the new law would have been low-key, simple to enact and be very cheap to comply with. It would be sweetened with tax relief initiatives. The law would have effectively and surreptitiously made all the equipment compatible, or vulnerable to INFERNO, it would have been so subtle and hidden. Then the U.S. would have leaned on friendly countries to require similar legislation. Believe me, it was all being done."

"But we're speaking hypothetically?"

Gricks smiled.

"What else can you tell me about INFERNO and how it relates to our unsolved murder?"

"When I left years ago, they were refining the search and computer destroy element of INFERNO. It was extremely sophisticated and this aspect alone could do many things with computers."

"Such as?"

"Key among them was the ability to defend against cyber-or on-line attack. But it could also set traps, allow an intruder in so far, then turn him back, foil him, or lock on to him and trace his point of origin. It could also launch a counterstrike and destroy his program, his system timed to happen immediately or at any desired date, time, second, while pinpointing his location."

"Why haven't these cases emerged in the press?"

"Because the government does not go to court on the cases involving attacks that just scratch the surface of the highest-security areas. It does not want the attention. The intruder is simply taken out of commission."

"What do you mean?"

"His or her system can be fried, he's shut down. They never ever penetrate very far in any high-level government system before they're thwarted. The government can shut them down on other charges too, diverting attention from the actual intrusion."

"Where did the INFERNO name come from?"

"From Dante's *Divine Comedy.* Because the system had several realms, or levels of impenetrable security, getting through them would be like going to hell because you would not escape. An inside joke, so to speak."

"So how does this relate to the murder of a San Francisco office worker?"

Gricks pulled Wyatt's damaged disk from his pocket. "Your disk had an INFERNO style of signature all over it."

"Jesus."

"It's very rare but it appears that somebody your victim communicated with on-line had demonstrated an understanding of INFERNO. It's not identical but it's incredibly similar in the malevolent way it defended itself against penetration then sought to destroy the attacker. You. Hence your disk was destroyed when you attempted to find him."

"I didn't know he was there in the first place. How good is this person?"

"Dangerously good. Remember a few years back, there was the famous *I Love You* virus. Then came the more powerful *Thank You* virus, a simple e-mail ditty that breached about ninety-one percent of all e-mail on earth within three days. Did some major damage. Then came the *Code Red* threat."

"Yes."

"Relatively speaking, they were harmless. But this guy, from my early read on things, has just demonstrated that he has the potential, I stress the potential, to unleash a mass-mailing worm with some sophisticated DDOS tools."

"What sorts of Distributed Denial of Service signatures are we talking, Gricks?"

"Potentially complicated frontier stuff, the new super-potent DEMON configurations. Conceptually, they think for themselves."

"Never heard of them."

"Well we're getting into sci-fi, applying the realities of doctored silicon. Anyway, your guy could have some heavy-duty malicious activity planned, like exploration and reconnaissance for widespread attacks. I stress *could.* He also seems easily able to launch backdoor compromises with several intricate password sniffers, so he could launch attacks in the future. I would rate him as one hundred times more sophisticated than the *I Love You* and *Thank You* people. And I don't know what else he might be hiding in his bag of tricks."

"Shouldn't you be on to this, alerting your cyber-detective friends with INFERNO? Help me find him, help me take him out of commission."

"It's not that simple, Ben."

"Christ, Gricks. Aren't you concerned?"

"We can watch, but can't let anyone know."

"I don't get it."

"He's demonstrated the *capability.* You can't act on what he is capable of doing. You can't arrest me because I am *capable* of a committing a crime. He has not expressed intent or conspiracy. Right. I checked. He has not attempted to breach any federal, state, or local security system."

"What do you call what he did to my disk?"

"An act of defense, albeit a disturbing one, but it's not a willful expression to threaten or conspire to threaten the security of the United States. People do have rights, you know."

"What am I going to do? Help me find out if he's a suspect or not. If I nail him you might get to see his workshop."

"It's complicated."

"Simplify it for me. A woman was murdered."

"All right. In simple terms, my job is to defend against threats to the nation. So far, this guy has not moved into my jurisdiction. So as horrible and cold as this sounds, Ben, I can't play my hand for one murder, or several murders. That's your jurisdiction."

"Whose side are you on?" Wyatt shook his head. "National security shit."

"I absolutely can't be involved. I told you that. I could face federal charges for talking to you. I could go to prison."

Wyatt sat back. Defeated. Disgusted. "You married, Randy?"

"Yes."

"Got kids?"

"Two girls."

"What if he did what he did to that woman to one of your daughters, then gives you the finger with this?" Wyatt tapped the disk.

"I knew you would play this cop crap on me. I knew it." He looked away, swallowing his beer. He said nothing and reached into his bag for a small padded envelope. Slid it to Wyatt. Inside he found half a dozen unmarked disks and a small plain booklet that looked like instructions.

"What's this?"

“Ammunition, if you decide to go into battle.” Gricks left several crumpled bills on the table then stood to leave. “I’m not involved. Understand. You’re on your own, Ben.”

FORTY-EIGHT

Walkie-talkie chatter snapped back and forth on the restaurant set near the financial district where an exhausted stone-faced crew was shooting a TV commercial. Sydowski looked for Louise.

"Sir?"

The tanned muscle-bound security guard placed his hand on Sydowski's shoulder. "This part of the restaurant is a closed set. You have to leave."

Sydowski looked at the hand, then at the guard. He opened his jacket, revealing his gun, then fished his SFPD star from his jacket. No other words were required.

Sydowski made his way deeper into the set. Louise was refusing his calls. He had a little time before his next homicide meeting. Before letting him go, Turgeon checked his cell phone and increased the ring volume.

Picking his way through the conversations, young girls with clipboards, the technicians in torn jeans, carrying electrical equipment, the suits drinking over-priced mineral water from ornate bottles, Sydowski saw Louise sitting by herself at a table, crunching on a celery stick, studying a script. She didn't look up from the pages.

"You here to apologize, or arrest me, Walter?"

"Arrest you?"

"For the crime of trying to help an obstinate jackass."

"Those are my only choices?" He pleaded into her lovely green eyes. She was still cross with him. "I've come to apologize, Louise."

She flipped her script over, folded her arms. "Go on."

"I was wrong." He sat down. "Look, I won't go into Reggie getting shot because of Wyatt freezing on him. That's a raw wound with me. You have to understand that."

"You've made it abundantly clear."

"Louise, I was wrong for the way I treated you."

"I was only trying to help."

"I know." Sydowski's phone rang. He slipped on his bifocals to study the keypad of his ringing new cell phone. "I liked the old ones better. These new tiny things are a chore."

"You don't deserve me, you know?" Louise pulled up her bag to rummage through it.

"I know." He pressed the right button. "Sydowski."

"It's Linda. I've just rolled up out front where you are. Horace called. He's waiting for us at Hunter's Point."

"Be there in two minutes." He hung up and stood. "I have to go."

"Here." Louise passed him a brown envelope. Looked like it was from a legal firm. "This is for Reggie Pope. You have to get it to him."

"What is it?"

"Remember, I had asked my friend to do some quick checking? Well it seems Reggie may have a civil case against the building's owner, or the city."

"But Louise, he can't afford --"

"No fees. He's doing this as a favor for me."

Sydowski tucked the envelope in his jacket, kissed Louise on her cheek, then left.

Turgeon drove to the crime lab.

"Everything all kissie face with Louise, Walt?"

Sydowski made a point of not answering her.

"Just remember the golden rule. Women are always right. Men are always wrong. Got it? Repeat after me, Walt. Women are always --"

He fired a dead serious stare at her.

"Oh my. It didn't go well, then?"

"We're fine, Linda. Knock it off, please."

"All right, Inspector Serious. Since you patched things up with Louise, are you going to patch it up with Wyatt?"

Another stare.

"Walt, we could use him to help us narrow things. Ever think of that?"

"He's a liability. He's the reason Reggie Pope is picking through garbage. Anything *he* brings us, his cyber-phantom crap, will not stand up in court. Not with his history. I could just see a defense attorney feasting on his background."

A block later Turgeon pressed him. "I know we're building up the physical, but what about the line we've kicked around that she met him on-line? Walt, we know full well the country is dotted with homicides by creeps using the Internet to troll for victims."

"I agree. We haven't discounted it. We've given Wyatt free reign but so far he's found nothing. Look, I do take that investigative line seriously. I've backed us up."

"How?"

"I've made a few calls. We're covered."

"I'm your partner."

"Leo agreed to let me pass Iris Wood's ISP account information to a friend with computer intrusion at Justice in Sacramento. So far he's found nothing."

"Thanks for telling me. You going to let me and Dee query VICAP locally now? We all agree he's mobile. Maybe we should just make a full submission. What do you think?"

"Too risky. Things could leak to the press. It would be a dangerous

gamble at this stage."

"I don't know."

"What don't you know? Horace has given us some solid physical evidence and a potential suspect pool that he is busting his hump to shrink. We've got a shoe impression and the BWI sticker. We can build on this a brick at a time."

Turgeon parked the car at Building 606.

Horace was at his desk on the phone, finishing a call. After hanging up, he picked up a file folder from his desk. "Have a seat." Horace wet his forefinger.

"Is this good?"

"It will reduce the pool, but I want to explain."

Turgeon pulled out her notebook, cueing Sydowski to do the same.

"As you recall, the torn BWI sticker had an array of trace carpet fibers. We concluded analysis for the flock type that gave us Five Star American Skyways and the passenger lists."

"We're working hard on the pool of names." Sydowski lifted his bifocals to stare at Horace's computer screen.

"Next we analyzed other carpet fibers, and found the nylon type used in cars. I did some XRF work, which basically detects elements found in carpet fibers. Helps me make a distinction."

"Those the fibers on your screen?" Turgeon said.

"Yes. Now, judging from the color-key, dyes, and other factors, I would suggest it is the type found in rental fleet cars manufactured by Ford."

Sydowski and Turgeon exchanged glances.

"Could narrow things." Sydowski made a note.

"I want to caution you, Walt, there are many variables. I'm giving you probabilities that the carpet is consistent with that found in late-model Fords. We're going out on a limb."

"Horace, we know. Just tell us the best place to start looking."

"San Francisco International is served by nine major car rental agencies, including the new one." Horace handed Sydowski a list. As you can see where I've indicated, four of them offered the full-sized Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable models with the type of carpet consistent with the fibers we found from the suspect's shoe trace."

"This is outstanding work, Horace."

"I'm going to do some more involved analysis on the auto fibers to see if I can kick down that list even more."

During the drive to the Hall of Justice, Sydowski called ahead to alert Lieutenant Gonzales.

"Leo, we've got another break."

Sydowski told him what Horace had found and how they were going to need the cooperation of car rental agencies to show the contracts for Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable models rented at the airport for the same period as

the airline passenger list.

Gonzales got things moving fast.

Turgeon was pleased. “I think this is a good day, Walt. How ’bout you?”

“It’s a good day.”

FORTY-NINE

While Belinda Holcomb's casket was lowered into the ground at a tiny cemetery near the Minnesota-Manitoba border, homicide detectives in Toronto intensified their hunt for her killer.

Reesor and Winslow assembled every detail they had on her murder to feed into a powerful computer program designed to track serial criminals who crossed jurisdictions.

Canada's version of the FBI's VICAP is the Violent Crime Linkage Analysis System, known as ViCLAS. It is administered locally at regional centers and nationally by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. As it is in some states, it is law in the Canadian province of Ontario that police investigating major violent crimes submit their case to the system.

Reesor liked using databases but, like most investigators, he hated using it whenever he had a fresh murder where he had a suspect in custody, a virtual grounder that he was certain was a one-time, *I didn't mean to kill him* deal, with no links to anything or anybody other than the sorry humps involved.

The RCMP has adapted the FBI's VICAP concept, enhancing it by requiring detectives to complete 262 questions on homicides and sexual assaults; every iota on the crime scene, even hold-back.

That's where Reesor, like most cops, had a problem. He never was comfortable with the law requiring him to give up his hold-back. Often, he felt hold-back was more than critical to a case, it *was* the case.

Then there was the security issue. There were only several dozen specialists across the country with access to the system. Under special laws, the information they analyzed was classified restricted. It could not be released. Hold-back evidence in case reports was X'd in the system and could only be accessed by a security-rated specialist working with the people who owned the case. The system was a stand-alone network with built in security measures which tracked and recorded everyone who viewed a file.

Still, detectives feared leaks and were wary about submitting cases.

To Reesor, the system was more red tape to add to his burden of paperwork when he should be on the street chasing down leads, bringing in suspects. Often he and Winslow sweated blood for key evidence on a case. The notion of sharing what they had with lazy, sloppy investigators in other jurisdictions sickened him. Sometimes the ViCLAS book was occasionally forgotten until a supervisor reminded detectives of the legal deadline requiring it to be completed.

"Jackie, I swear, sometimes this thing is like writing an exam," Reesor said two hours after they had started answering the questions.

"Sure, babe, but we know it works. Here's the autopsy."

That was the thing about ViCLAS, VICAP, and similar systems. As years went by and more police forces submitted cases and used them effectively, more dramatic success stories surfaced. In one, a twenty-year-old murder was solved when a cold-case squad submitted it to the FBI in Quantico. Within an hour, it was linked to a new homicide in Orlando, Florida, through the killer's handwriting found at both scenes. In another file, ViCLAS linked the murders of seven hookers, five in Detroit and two across the river in Windsor, to a trucker. Diehards like Reesor were slowly beginning to see the light.

Reesor studied Fydor's report on the tattered airport code fragment, and the list of airports it could be linked to: Buffalo, Burbank, Baltimore, Abileen, West Palm Beach, Billings, or any of the other cities on his list.

Which one is a link to our murder?

Reesor then submitted all the details he had on the shoe impression, believing that the answers to the case were outside of Toronto.

"Let's go, Jackie." Reesor closed his ViCLAS book. His entire case was going out there. Everything.

Reesor's supervisor signed his submission. It went to the sexual assault squad, which coordinated all of Toronto's submissions to the ViCLAS provincial center.

The center was located at Ontario Provincial Police headquarters in Orillia, an hour's drive north of Toronto. Inside the new postmodern building, within the behavioural science section, a ViCLAS specialist entered the file into the computer system. She began searching for potential linkages similar to crimes committed across the province and the country. No immediate links. It was going to take time for further analysis, like checking parolee data banks, other police computer files, and talking to the investigators.

The bright faces of her son and daughter on a mall Santa's knee smiled back at her from a framed picture as she studied crime scene photos of Belinda Holcomb, stabbed repeatedly in the heart while watching *Romeo and Juliet* in a Toronto theater. The specialist entered her codes for access to Reesor's hold-back evidence. Sipping tea from her *World's Greatest Mom* mug, she examined every detail three times.

Oh boy. This is data we should move on.

She reached for her telephone, punching a special speed-dial number.

The line was answered on the first ring.

"Lardner."

"Art, it's Sadie. How's your caseload?"

"Up to my armpits in work before vacation, why?"

"I've got one for you that you should submit to VICAP in Quantico. He looks mobile. You should see this one now."

"All right, kid."

The RCMP's Technical and Protective Operational Facilities base is some sixty miles north of New York's border with Canada. It sits on Ottawa's east side between expressways and sprawling suburbs nearly hidden on a forested hilltop overlooking strawberry patches, apple orchards, and disappearing dairy country. Razor wire tops the chain-link fence lining the grounds. A black steel gate with a guard booth, security cameras and restricted-access warnings, protects the building. A bison head, the seal of the RCMP, rises specter-like out of the building's soft gray stone over the entrance. The sounds of birdsong, flapping flags, and the hum of the traffic do not betray the deadly serious work going on behind the dark green windows.

Inside the building, among its secret sections, RCMP Sergeant Arthur Lardner, a seasoned ViCLAS specialist with the highest-level security clearance within the program, was analyzing the fresh Toronto case. Lardner had talked directly with Reesor and Fydor several times over the phone about the critical details.

"Be careful with our file, Lardner," Reesor said.

When he was satisfied he knew enough, the next call Lardner made on the file was to the FBI's VICAP coordinator in Quantico who handled RCMP submissions. The Mountie told his FBI colleague about the new case.

"We better get that into our program right away," the FBI specialist said. "Shoot it down on the encrypted fax. You've got the number."

FIFTY

After Reed finished the Folsom feature on bad cop Donnie Ray Ball, he massaged his neck. Something about the Las Vegas murder gnawed at him as he scanned his desk, cluttered with newspapers, notebooks, unopened mail, reference books, cassette tapes and the files Carla Purcell's mother had given him. Something about the case. A key thread of information he had read in one of the files. Sifting through the chaos, he couldn't find the page, or remember the details. The documents were jumbled, gathered hastily in his Las Vegas hotel because he had overslept, nearly missing his return flight.

No one knew the real reason he went to Las Vegas. The trip was a gamble that paid off with a few bits of new data. Now, he wanted to secretly dig into the Las Vegas murder. Check its similarities with Iris Wood's case. Both victims were the same type. In both cases their corpses were posed. The bridal shop in San Francisco. The statue in the Las Vegas church. The *Pieta.* Maybe there was something there. What was the thing that had slipped his mind? Flipping through the Purcell files of anti-death penalty brochures, printouts of e-mails with friends, daycare schedules, his frustration mounting as he snapped from one page to the next. It could be the key to breaking the story wide open. A fragment he suspected the Vegas cops missed. *Think.* He was reading the files in his Las Vegas hotel room. Did he read something before falling asleep? Or had he dreamed it? Where was it? What was it?

"So, Tommy. How was prison? Make any new friends in the big house?" Wilson said.

"Sure. Donnie Ray and I are an item now."

"I'm happy for you."

Wilson's bracelets clinked as she began going through her notes for a story. Reed turned to his computer, concentrating on researching the *Pieta* on the Internet and his Las Vegas files.

"Hey, Tom," Wilson dropped her voice to a confidential level. "Brader called me at home last night. Asked me how I was doing. Tried to make small talk. Weird huh?"

"Weird."

Before leaving Las Vegas, Reed had stopped at the Church of Mary the Compassionate Virgin, where Carla Purcell's corpse had been found with the *Pieta,* in an alcove to the right of the altar. Reed had gone there to see the statue, a copy of Michelangelo's *Pieta* in Rome.

"So what should I do about it?"

"He's a pig. Stay away from him."

According to the church pamphlet Reed picked up, its *Pieta* was glazed

plaster, an exact replica made from protective shipping casts taken from Michelangelo's marble original decades ago when the Vatican had allowed its treasures to be shown for a few years around the world. It was the only time in some 500 years the great work had left Rome.

"He's not my type but he's kind of cute."

"He's married. He's got two daughters. He just wants another notch in his belt."

"Maybe I want another notch in mine."

Reed stared at Wilson, her eyes twinkling, flashing one of her *just-kidding* grins.

"Molly. Stay away from him." Reed shook his head, returning to his work, clicking through Web sites about Michelangelo. The *Pieta,* known as the "pity or sorrow," stands nearly six feet tall, depicting Mary with her son, the dead Christ, in her lap moments after he was taken down from the cross. It is one of the world's greatest representations of eternal love. Commissioned in the late 1400s by a French cardinal to immortalize his gravesite.

But why was Carla Purcell, a lonely Las Vegas daycare worker, put there? Why pose her like that? Was this a signature? It had to be the same guy who posed Iris Wood in the bridal shop? Maybe. Maybe not. If so, what was the link? Where was that document? That page he thought he'd read? Maybe the answer was there?

His line rang.

"You're back," his wife said.

"Ann, I was just going to call you. Brader ordered me to the newsroom directly from the airport to finish the feature. He pushed up the deadline. It's going tomorrow, I'm just wrapping up."

"So you can make it tonight?"

Reed hesitated.

"The banquet, Tom. Remember?"

"Sure, right." Reed saw Brader approaching, gripping that yellow legal pad, patting his hair, stealing glimpses of Wilson, whose top had a plunging V-neck. "What time are we leaving?"

"Soon. Could you be home in an hour?"

"You bet."

Reed hung up. Brader had leaned over Wilson's shoulder, reading her story on her monitor, inhaling her fragrance.

"Tom," Brader said without looking at Reed. "I'd like to see you in my office now please."

In his office, Brader sat before his computer and displayed Reed's story on Donnie Ray Ball.

"What did you do in Las Vegas? There's nothing in here about his family."

"I got stood up. Couldn't find them."

"The story's flat. There's nothing in here that we discussed. Nothing

about breaking the thin blue line, stressed cops losing control, turning on the citizenry, committing murders. Nothing contextual. Frankly, this is cow dung. You didn't even hook the damn thing on your witness and Iris Wood's case."

Reed rolled his eyes. "It could be a city editor."

"Excuse me?"

"Wood's killer could be anybody. I told you it's not a cop but likely a guy posing as a cop. Clyde, you had an imaginary story in your head and wanted me to find imaginary facts to support it."

"Reed, your work confirms that you're not an investigative reporter. You couldn't break wind, let alone news."

"You know what's weak?"

"Careful, Tom. I've got your job by a thread here." Brader's jaw muscles tightened. He loosened his tie. "What did you do in Las Vegas?"

"Worked on my assignment."

"Have you got a gambling addiction?"

"What?"

"Visit a dude ranch? Are you dysfunctional in any way? First step to recovery is admitting the problem. I'll help. I'll have the business office check your receipts. We can offer counseling."

"I don't believe you." Reed held his tongue. "My story's done. I'm going home."

"Reed, if you misled me. If you misrepresented the paper, or spent its money without authorization, it's a firing offense. So watch what you're doing."

"Clyde. You'd better watch what *you're* doing." Reed said, making sure Brader's attention followed his to the pictures of Brader's wife and two daughters.

Ann was wearing a black knee-length skirt and a silk top. Reed thought she looked stunning.

"Hi. Can you zip me? How was Nevada?"

Reed dropped his bag on the bed, pulled up her back zipper. "Hot. How's Zach doing?"

"They're still working on the list and his tests." She put pearl studs in her pierced earlobes. "Could be asthma, or allergies. Melody took him to the park. Better hurry. I've set out your blue suit."

In the shower, in the cab downtown, during the small talk over cocktails at the banquet, during the dinner, Reed was haunted by Carla Purcell's case. When Ann squeezed his hand during the evening's speeches, it hit him. Full force.

"Ann, I've got to go."

"But why, Tom? Are you ill?"

"No. It's urgent. Something I just remembered on the story."

"Call the paper." She glanced at her watch, well aware of the *Star's* deadlines.

"No." He pushed his chair back. "I have to go."

"Tom," she whispered, "do you really have to go, *now?"*

"Yes, I have to go now."

"I don't like this."

"Ann, I'm sorry."

"I can feel this story wrapping itself around you."

Ann turned away from him to applaud the speaker. Reed walked silently on the padded carpet to the hotel's lobby.

I better be right about this.

He felt his stomach quake, and he began trotting.

FIFTY-ONE

The hotel doorman summoned a taxi for Reed. At the *Star,* he didn't have to show his ID to the night security officer who buzzed him in.

"Hey, Tom, you're working late."

In the city newsroom the night crew, putting the final touches on the next day's edition, didn't even notice Reed at his desk, in his suit, his tie loosened, tearing through the files. He found the lost page, seized it, then punched an extension on his phone.

"Computer room."

"Sebastian there?"

"One sec." Reed heard the drone of the *Star's* entire computer system as someone shouted.

"Tan here."

"Sebastian, it's Reed in the newsroom."

"What's up Tom, got a problem?"

"Can you help me with something computer related. Just between you and me?"

"What is it?"

"I'll have to show you."

"Sure, come on down. It's quiet."

The *Star's* computer system was housed on the building's main floor, three floors down from News and one up from the pressroom. Banks of computers hummed on linoleum floors, used to keep dust and debris to a minimum, in the brightly lit labyrinth of glass-walled sections.

It was the brain and nerve center of the newspaper, its entire system drew its life from here. Every computer terminal in the plant, advertising, the presses, circulation, all editorial departments, every network, every keystroke, were all ensured here from the techs in the control room, who rolled from server to server on wheeled chairs.

Sebastian Tan was the top night tech. He kept the system clicking worry-free at warp speed. Tan, the silent type, had gone to MIT, Stanford, worked in security for several Silicon Valley companies, sold his own Internet firm a few years back, and came to the *Star* because he was bored. Tan wore khaki shorts, a Crypt Kicker T-shirt, and some acne cream. He was twenty-five.

Late one night when Reed came down to get a laptop fixed, he had befriended Tan. The younger man confided that when he was fifteen, he got into trouble with the FBI for intruding on some national security systems. Tan's dad had pulled some strings in Washington and managed to keep it quiet. Tan boasted with dead seriousness to Reed that no system existed that

was impenetrable, that he secretly ventured into restricted areas to test his skills.

Reed needed those skills tonight.

"Please Sebastian, would you just give it a quick try?"

Tan was looking at the page Reed had given him.

Dear CP:

I just have to know, if you found the right man, could you forgive him the sins of his past life?

Tan and Reed were alone in the computer room office. Tan studied the data atop the message. He chewed on the corners of his plastic security swipe cards, his laminated *Star* employee ID, which hung on a chain around his neck.

"What are you looking for exactly?"

"I want the sender's name, current real physical address. Everything you can get me on him."

Tan tapped his chin with his cards.

"Can you do it, Sebastian?"

"Just between you and me?"

"Absolutely."

"Come on."

Tan took Reed into a smaller office. Three of its walls were glass. The other had file cabinets, bookshelves, and a large poster of Superman. The large desk occupying the room had Tan's computer terminal. "Shut the door, Tom."

Tan began entering commands on his keyboard. He went on-line, working for over fifteen full minutes in silence, Reed standing behind him, arms folded, watching patiently as Tan tried a number of scenarios. Screen after screen of codes, numbers, swam by. Reed was seeing things he'd never seen before, a world unknown to him of computer language, matrixes, programs. He was lost.

"So what is this, top secret stuff, Tom?"

"Just between you and me, the receiver was murdered in Las Vegas. I suspect the sender is her killer."

Tan looked at Reed. "Cool." Tan continued working, his computer beeping, trilling. Tan's phone rang. He ignored it. "Ned will get it." Tan blinked thoughtfully, studying his screen, which was frozen. He tried something.

"Odd."

"What is it?"

"Very strange ML. I've heard of some leading edge in development. This is wild, exotic."

"I'm afraid you lost me, buddy."

Tan resumed typing. "All right. I'll try this. Seems I underestimated this system. It's deceptively sophisticated. Like a work of art, really." Two lines

on his phone rang at once. “Ned!” Tan shouted to the outer office, then got one of the ringing lines. “Tan here. Yes. Correct. Bring them back on-line.”

Reed noticed through the glass a series of red, green, blue and yellow lights began strobing among the banks of big computers in the large computer area. Tan left his computer and went to a keyboard in the outer section, entered a few commands. The blinking lights stopped.

“Presses will start soon,” Tan said, returning to his computer, resuming his attempts to intrude on the system that sent Carla Purcell the short e-mail.

“What makes you think the sender is the killer?”

“A calculated hunch.”

Tan studied his screen. His computer began beeping rapidly.

“Holy cow!” Tan lifted his hands from his keyboard. “How did that happen? I’ve never seen!--”

“What is it?”

Tan started working faster on his keyboard “No. No. Oh no. Stop.” Tan’s worried eyes shot out to the bank of computers. His line began ringing.

“What the hell is this, Reed?”

“What is it?”

Tan punched an extension on his line. “Tell everyone to save and shut down immediately!”

Tan punched a number of commands on his keyboard. His chair spun as he rushed to the large computer room, pressing keypad codes. Two other techs emerged and Tan gave them frantic orders to join him. Reed remained transfixed in the small office, studying Tan’s monitor. It went black, then white, then fuzzy. Strange things were happening.

“We’re getting error messages. Tell the pressroom to delay. It’s not safe yet!” Tan shouted into a cell phone pressed to his ear.

Reed watched Tan’s monitor act like a TV receiving a strange signal through a snow blizzard while Tan was shouting into his phone.

“Save and shut down immediately! Everything! I think it’s malevolent! Unplug everything. Power down.” Tan shouted to Reed. “Tom, unplug my system now!”

The computer room phones ringing, Reed reached to unplug Tan’s system but he froze, his eyes widened.

“My God!”

Tan’s monitor came alive with a clear image of some kind of home movie. The perspective of someone in a church. The Las Vegas church -- walking toward the *Pieta* walking slowly, the camera shaking a bit, blurring a bit. The camera turned down, gazing at a sleeping woman -- red paint spilled all over her face -- Reed knew that face -- Carla Purcell -- being carried to the *Pieta* -- not sleeping not paint -- blood -- now being placed atop the dead Christ in the lap of Mary someone speaking. “Mother of God, pray for us sinners” A hand in a latex glove. A finger extended, dipping into her blood, and touched Mary’s face, making a bloody tear under each eye of the Blessed

Virgin. My God, my God. Reed's gooseflesh rising with the tiny hairs on the back of his neck, not realizing he had been pressing the print screen button -- before the monitor went black.

Reed collapsed in Tan's chair, thrusting his face in his hands. Swallowing hard, he regained his composure as the printer near him came to life, spitting out grainy frames from the horror he had witnessed. Three pages. Reed grabbed them, folded them, and tucked them into the breast pocket of his suit. Unplugged everything just as Tan returned, talking on his cell phone.

"Yes. I want two minutes. Two, then reboot. We should be okay."

Tan switched off his phone. "I've never seen anything like that Reed. This stays between us."

"What happened?"

Tan was silent, studying the e-mail, then going through a worn notebook in his back pocket. "Some kind of overwhelming malevolent system. I've never encountered anything like it. It launched an attack on us for simply knocking on its door. It went through firewalls, gunning for the mail server, routers, all our internal systems. I'm baffled at how it could do what it was doing. How I caught it just in time. Reed, it would have melted our entire system."

The line rang. Tan took it. "Up and running. Everything's saved. Tell everyone to power on, reboot."

Tan hung up and glared at Reed. "Don't take this the wrong way, Tom, but don't ever ask me to do anything like that ever again."

Reed nodded, then left the building thrusting his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking.

After several blocks and constantly checking to make sure he had the three printout pictures, he hailed a taxi home.

FIFTY-TWO

Sydowski sat at his desk in homicide polishing his bifocals with his tie, reciting the positives as if they were prayers. Bit by bit they were getting closer.

They had gone from zero leads when he had caught Iris Wood's case, to a suspect pool of 2,769 names, that shrunk to 600, but they still had a long way to go. They had reduced the pool to some eighty possibles. That was the number of men who met the criteria so far.

Each name on the list had flown on Five Star Skyways between Baltimore and San Francisco in the week before the murder. Each man had rented a car from one of the four rental companies at SFO offering a Ford Taurus or Mercury Sable.

Sydowski slipped on his glasses, thumbing through the files, appreciating that he was working from a premise based on solid trace evidence, the shaky eyewitness account of a street criminal, and his own gut instincts.

Following this line could prove futile. The variables were endless. The killer may not have rented a car in that period, or rented one at all. Or, he may have rented elsewhere. He could have been someone's passenger. Could have borrowed or stolen a car. Could fit any one of a thousand other scenarios.

Trust the physical facts. The trace evidence linked the killer to BWI, it put him on a Five Star jet, it put him in a late-model rental Ford or Mercury, and it put him at Stern Grove and in the bridal shop.

Sydowski believed in physical evidence.

The car rental agencies cooperated, but it had taken several days to amass all the contracts with applicable names. Security officials had to make priority requests to their respective record-storage sites in cities across the country. In many cases the original records had to be searched manually.

Now they were going hard on the eighty names, running them with police agencies in Maryland, the District of Columbia, Delaware, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Again, they ran them through California databases, parolees, state and federal prison records, crosschecked them with employee, policy holder, and claimant lists of American Federated Insurance. They pumped all the relevant names through NCIC.

Sydowski finally allowed Linda at the VICAP terminal, making general queries for similarities in all unsolved ritual murders in the Bay Area and all of the northern California cases. Intense. She made a series of queries on the region's unsolved homicides:

all single white females aged 20 to 40

all cases involving mutilation but no sexual assault
all cases involving a suspected police officer
all cases where the victim was publicly displayed

Turgeon would remove the pen clamped in her teeth to make notes. She was familiar with most of the files. Sydowski still refused to make a full submission to VICAP. He was satisfied with their progress. Didn't see a need for outside help at this point.

As the VICAP keyboard clicked, Sydowski glimpsed the envelope Louise had given him for Reggie Pope. Peeking out of his jacket pocket, reminding him to call personnel for Reggie's current address in the Tenderloin.

He thought of Wyatt. What the hell was *he* doing? Sydowski had heard nothing more on Iris Wood's computer from him. Just as well. The less he saw of Wyatt, the better his life would be.

Turgeon tossed her notebook on her desk and plopped in her chair.

"Walt, we're spinning our wheels here." She opened a can of diet soda with a hiss. "I talked to Dee, the VICAP coordinator at Golden Gate. She's poised for us to submit the entire case to Quantico. A formal priority submission. Put everything out there now. The hold-back. The shoe, BWI, the stun gun, mutilation."

"Be patient."

"Walt. Damn it, there has got to be a link."

"We're gaining on him my way. Look where we started and look where we are. We can't risk anything at this point. If it leaks, we lose him."

"I'll help complete every one of the ninety-five questions in the submission, Walt."

"Linda, please. Humor an old man."

"Excuse me, Inspectors?"

Horace Meeker materialized next to their desks, looking somewhat out of place without his white lab smock. Dressed in a jacket, sky-blue button-down shirt, navy tie loosened, collar button undone, allowing his neck to relax. He had a small valise. Blinking behind his thick lenses. "I think it's important for us to talk right now."

They went to an empty homicide interview room and closed the door. Horace extracted a thin file folder from his valise, opened it to another lab report. Sydowski noticed it was written in longhand, as if hurried.

"I just came from the airport. I did some on-site checking with the car rental agencies there, just firsthand inquiries for confirmation."

"And?" Sydowski said.

"I got it and thought you should know right away."

"Whaddya got, Horace?" Linda set her soft drink down.

"I am confident you can limit your suspect pool to one car rental agency. The new one, United Coast."

"How did you do that?"

"Shampoo."

"Shampoo?" Turgeon said.

"I did more work on the auto carpet fibers, using energy-dispersive X-ray fluorescence."

"Right, XRF."

"Also did some optical microscopy and polymer characterization, so I could check elements on individual carpet fibers, you know, like material used in production or added in post-production, treatments, and cleaners."

Turgeon pulled out her notebook. "Like shampoo."

"Correct. Like the shampoo used by United Coast to clean its rentals at San Francisco International." Horace, was studying his pages of notes. "I checked with United Coast's drums. Called the supplier. UC uses an industrial brand that contains a slightly higher than average level of two-butoxyethanol. According to the NIOSH reviews, two-butoxyethanol is a type of glycol ether, a quick-drying colorless liquid used in organic solvents, for things like household and industrial cleaning solutions."

"Like a stain remover, stain protector?"

"Sort of. Anyway, it's a safe bet our fiber comes from a United Coast rental."

"How safe?" Sydowski said. "How do we know the cleaner is not domestic and could have been used to clean any car anywhere?"

Horace removed his big glasses from his big head and rubbed his tired eyes before replacing the glasses.

"Walt, you must have lucky stars, because it turns out that United Coast, being a new car rental agency, is field-testing a brand-new auto carpet shampoo."

"That so?"

"And they started two weeks ago in one location in the entire U.S. Their outlet at San Francisco International."

Turgeon flipped the pages of her notes. "That's twenty-one names. You brought it down to twenty-one names."

"Horace." The gold crown in Sydowski's grin glinted. "That's terrific."

"It started with you, Walt."

"How?"

"You noticed the road paint was new. Everyone missed it. That's old-fashioned detective work." Horace looked at Turgeon. "Don't ever let this guy fool you. He knows what he's doing."

"Some days maybe." Turgeon smiled.

Later that day, Sydowski and Turgeon talked with United Coast's director of security, who arranged to provide them all documentation on each of the twenty-one men who fit the criteria.

Marshaling the actual Taurus and Sable units the men had rented was going to take time. Most were in use, or had been returned to other United outlets.

"Locate them wherever they are and pull them out of circulation for us, please," Sydowski said.

Investigators knew any crime scene evidence or trace in the car would be contaminated. Sydowski told United's executive office that it was imperative the company get every suspect car back to San Francisco as soon as possible and that it was "critical they not be cleaned in any way."

The bonus was that United Coast had a state-of-the-art photo security system. Before departing its lot, a customer had to stop at a barricade, turn his or her face left to a stationary eye-level security camera that required them to hold up the rental agreement. A photograph was snapped, along with the time, date, and vehicle information. Then the barricade was raised.

By that evening, Sydowski and Turgeon had posted twenty-one photographs from United Coast on a large wheeled chalkboard in the homicide detail. Under each photograph they had posted the rental agreement, the copy of each man's driver's license, and other details as their records checks found them.

Energized by their break in the case, Sydowski and Turgeon ordered a pizza to the Hall. They were alone, saying little, staring at the board. Sydowski eventually withdrew into his thoughts. He walked to a window, standing there for several moments before returning.

"I think we've gone as far as we can go on our own. I think now it's time Linda," he said, studying the eyes on the board staring at him. "Time to submit it all to VICAP, with details of these men as potential suspects."

"Hallelujah."

Turgeon alerted the FBI VICAP coordinator at the San Francisco field office on Golden Gate. Sydowski got a VICAP form and began answering its questions on details about the victim, the crime, the killer, pulling every applicable factor from Iris Wood's case, including his hold-back, BWI, the shoe, everything. Looking at the faces on the board somehow made it all the more real, convincing Sydowski this guy was unstoppable.

Within 24 hours, the Iris Wood case would be entered into the VICAP database maintained by the FBI in Quantico, Virginia. A VICAP coordinator for the West Region would immediately begin comparing their file against all other entries, keying on specific data in the crime that might reveal a signature, or pattern similar to other murders, which could point to a single suspect.

It was nearly 2 A.M. when they finished.

Turgeon had put her head down on her desk. She was asleep. Sydowski stood to stretch his stiffened muscles. He studied the board, feeling the righteousness of his duty rising as he bored into each pair of eyes.

You reached out of nowhere and took her. I will reach into nothing and

find you. You're here. I know you're here. I can feel you. I can smell you. We're coming for you.

One by one, Sydowski stared at the men on the board. One by one, they stared back, including the scarred face of Harlan Wells.

The alias used by Eugene Vryke.

FIFTY-THREE

Wyatt's PC in his apartment was a powerful customized top-of-the-line unit. He fired it up.

If he was going into unauthorized battle, he would keep it outside the SFPD. His police laptop sat idle on his kitchen table. Safe.

As his computer trilled and beeped to life, Wyatt pulled a cold beer from his refrigerator, took a long drink, put his feet up on his desk, leaned back in his swivel chair. He opened the padded envelope from Gricks and slid out the contents: four CDs marked *A* to *D* in felt pen, six floppies, marked *1* to *6,* and the thick little booklet. He began reading. Gricks explained that he was going to guide Wyatt by a pre-recorded instructional CD. The booklet advised Wyatt to listen carefully and pay attention to details. He was to start by inserting CD A.

"All right." Wyatt slid the CD into his computer. David Bowie's "Modern Love" flowed through Wyatt's sound system; then Gricks appeared on Wyatt's screen, staring into the camera above his own monitor. Hippie hair and beard nodding; he hummed with the lyrics as he worked on his keyboard.

You know, Gricks, it's a thin line between genius and insanity. Wyatt swallowed some beer. The song ended.

"Hello, Wyatt," Gricks continued working. "Better record the date and time. Everything is programmed from your system's clock to self-encrypt, then self-delete five days from now. Call it my insurance."

Wyatt noted the time.

"Now enter the names of any four of the seven dwarfs."

What?

"You've got two minutes, or it shuts down."

Wyatt typed *Sleepy, Grumpy, Doc,* and *Dopey.*

"Good. Remember them in sequence. Because that instruction will never be repeated. It's your password, should this hypothetical exercise go astray. You'll recall our discussion on classic Italian literature, the works of Dante? I've modified some of the classic Italian theories we discussed to give you some twenty different strategies to find your target. Do not make any attempt to employ these strategies from the damaged system or anything linked to the owner's on-line voyages. Understand?"

Wyatt sipped some beer. *Right.*

"Outside of this 'exercise,' should you come across anything from your target's internal arsenal, anything, consider it gold and immediately go to Disk five."

Got it. Disk five. Wyatt made a note.

"Ben," Gricks steepled his fingers. "I'm trying to get you inside undetected. By stealth. So you can grab him, if he's the one. He will beat most of the strategies. He is beyond a run-of-the-mill Web-page defacer, or virus weaver. He functions at a dangerously elevated level. It's crucial you follow my instructions to the letter. Let's get started."

Wyatt set out on one of the most complex and challenging probes he had ever experienced. He was shut down at every turn. At one stage he almost cracked his keyboard in frustration. By 2:15 A.M., he could not go on any longer. Six hours had passed. An avalanche of fatigue and futility rolled over him. After a quick hot shower, he fell into bed, feeling utterly defeated. He had tried nine of the twenty strategies Gricks had set up. All in vain.

He lay there depleted, feeling dejection coiling around him, crushing him with doubts about his abilities, himself, resurrecting the ghosts of Reggie Pope, the kid. Then he saw Olivia smiling upon him. Her lovely eyes and face watching over him from the small portrait on his nightstand. The work of a street artist on the Wharf. It warmed him and he fell asleep.

Wyatt's phone rang at 6:55 A.M. It was Sydowski.

"Get your sorry ass to the Hall for an eight o'clock case-status meeting."

"All right."

The fourth-floor meeting room was filled with nearly three dozen detectives, including more brass than previous status meetings. A lot of new faces. Late arrivals were forced to stand.

"We're going to keep this as brief as possible." Lieutenant Gonzales took a hit of coffee from his mug. "We got a break. We're going to tune the investigation accordingly, turn up the heat. I'm putting most of my team on this and we're drawing more bodies from General Works."

"Can you say what the lead is?" somebody asked.

"We'll tell you what you need to know," Sydowski said, rolling out the chalkboard displaying the suspects' faces. Chairs squeaked in anticipation.

"Inspector Sydowski will update you quickly."

"We now have a primary suspect pool of twenty-one men and we're going to distribute files to each team of detectives. You know the drill. Get your subject's time line around the murder, their whereabouts, then work on the résumé." Sydowski plopped down a stack of files on the suspects. "We're going to be marshaling our first batch of rental cars from United Coast's airport outlet. The company is volunteering the cars but they need to be coordinated and taken on a flatbed to Hunter's Point. We've been talking with the FBI and police in other jurisdictions, Las Vegas, Phoenix, New York, Cincinnati, Miami, for starters. We've had some discussion with those jurisdictions. Nothing concrete has popped. No links. Yet."

"Think you got serial, a traveler?" Somebody at the table said.

"That's my belief."

"What's your link, Walt? We understand he left a clean scene."

"Don't have it quite nailed yet, but we have some strong indicators. The case was just submitted to VICAP."

"What about her computer, Inspector?"

"We've had some glitches on that aspect of the investigation." Wyatt's head snapped up from his notepad. "The FBI will take custody of her system. Special Agents, Cherry Daniel, who flew up from San Diego, and Barry Hiltzer from Computer Intrusion in Hayward will assume control. Cherry?"

"We're taking her computer down to the CART lab in San Diego today," Cherry Daniel said. "We'll examine it there and do some analysis on all communication she sent or received through it. And we'll consult with NIPC at our headquarters in Washington."

"Excuse me," Wyatt said, "there's something you should know."

Ignoring him, Sydowski gave the FBI agents a warm, appreciative nod, telegraphing confidence. "That's it for now," he said. "We're fine, Inspector Wyatt."

The meeting began breaking up.

Gonzales called out: "Those teams assigned suspect files meet me in the homicide detail."

"Sounds like you got a strong break, Walt."

"Everybody's been working hard."

Files were collected, bodies began to shuffle out.

Wyatt sat there, dumbfounded, exhausted, staring at his empty notebook. Sydowski worked through the crowd, leaned down to Wyatt's ear, barely containing his scorn. "You go see Leo for your new assignment supercop, all right?"

The homicide receptionist called out to Sydowski. "Walter, thought I'd catch you before you head out." She dropped her voice but Wyatt heard. "Nella from personnel called. Here's Reggie's address in the Tenderloin."

Reggie in the hospital bed, his contempt for Wyatt echoing. *You stay the hell away from me.*

Wyatt remained there for a long time, swallowing the humiliation. It was premeditated. Sydowski wanted him there so he could stick it to him in front of the largest group possible. *Everyone, here's the fuck-up that got my old pal shot and this is what I'm going to do with him.* Forget the truth. Wyatt shook his head. How much more of this could he stand?

It was a bitter walk to see Gonzales.

"Ben, we need you to join our guys at United Coast at the airport," he said, "to help supervise the transportation of the cars from the outlet to the SFPD for forensic examination." Gonzales was almost sympathetic. "Then I need you back here, helping out with phone work."

At United Coast, a couple of uniforms in a radio car exchanged jokes and

sports wisdom while Wyatt studied his clipboard and kept to himself. Ford and Mercury engines growled as United Coast's crew inched the cars on a flatbed.

"So what's up, man?" Wyatt asked.

A United staff member with a tag over his heart that said DEWITT answered him. "Every one of these cars had to be rented by a customer who flew in from Baltimore."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, man. And we're roundin' up more." Dewitt was signing a sheet for Wyatt when three cars were loaded onto the flatbed. "I saw the paperwork in the office. Heard my supervisor talking to some attorney."

"How's that again?"

"The SFPD asked for all our Tauruses and Sables rented by dudes who flew in from BWI. So what's up with that, man?"

Baltimore.

Baltimore Washington International served the Fort Meade area. Several military installations were located there, including NSA, where Gricks said secret research was done on INFERNO.

"Good question," Wyatt said.

FIFTY-FOUR

Tears of blood *under Mary's eyes.*

Then Carla Purcell's profile, as she is being carried to the Pieta.

Then her corpse posed atop the dead Christ, on Mary's lap in the Las Vegas Church.

Reed bit his thumb, studying the images.

Was this for real? Had Carla Purcell's killer recorded her murder? Could he be staring at actual pictures of it?

Reed set his magnifying glass down on his desk, rubbing his whiskers, his weary eyes. He had been up much of the night, researching his break in the story. He went on-line, scouring Nevada news databases in case he missed anything. He searched the *Pieta* in case it was linked in other homicides. He was thinking of calling Darlene Purcell in Las Vegas when he heard Ann start the shower.

Reed had returned home late from the paper last night to find Ann asleep. She was upset with him for abandoning her at the banquet. He couldn't blame her. He had put her through so much. But last night had been critical. His instincts had paid off. He stared at the pictures. It was monumental. Ann had to understand. *"Look at this stuff."*

Somehow through skill, luck, a glitch, or a combination, Sebastian Tan had taken the scrap of data from Carla Purcell's sinister e-mail and traced it to the source, penetrated its system, enabling these images to slip out before the counterstrike took effect.

It had to be linked to Iris Wood. And how many others? The hypertext on the images was long, broken-off filled with alien symbols. He needed to know more before he could break the story and he had to be careful.

Zach had been up, coughing in his bathroom. Reed had hurried to him.

"I'm all right, Dad." Zach had splashed water on his pallid face. *"Really."* He had blinked a smile at Reed. *"I maybe got sick a little bit on my bed."*

"I'll take care of it." Reed tousled Zach's hair. *"You go have some juice or something before school."*

Zach's bed had been fine. Reed had looked at the model battle ships, the movie posters and comic books in his son's room. *He's growing up too fast.* Reed had been about to leave when he heard it. *Scratching.* Above Zach's bed. It had stopped. Reed had looked around, grabbed a bat and tapped the ceiling, then heard the scraping of tiny claws. *Mice?*

"What are you doing?" Ann had stood in the doorway for a moment, then walked off.

"Ann." He had stopped her in the hallway. *"You have every right to be angry."*

"Tom, you're becoming obsessed with this story."

"You have to understand why."

"Tom, I can't understand what on earth would make you do what you did last night. You could've made a call. You could've waited a few hours. What was so important? Tell me."

"I'll show you. In the study."

They closed the study door. Reed had explained his trip to Las Vegas, the information about Carla Purcell in the files her mother gave him. He had passed the critical e-mail printout to Ann, explaining how he had rushed from the banquet to the paper to get Tan to trace it. He told her what had happened next, then placed the images in her hand.

Ann had looked at them. *"They're real?"*

"Her mother told me Carla's body was posed on the statue in the church. I visited the church, saw the statue. Tan used her e-mail, the strange one seeking forgiveness for past sins." Reed had tapped the pictures. *"This is what he got. Ann, this is the church, the statue. That is Carla Purcell."*

Ann's hand had covered her mouth. She had begun shaking her head and turning the pictures over.

"Give them to Sydowski."

"What? No. I'm building a story."

"Give them to Sydowski, Tom, and back off."

"Ann, I've been suffering Brader and doing my best work here."

"Tom, you're consumed by it. Did you forget everything we all went through the last time you got too close to something like this?"

"This is different, Ann. It's not the same."

"It is *the same! Your name is out there on every story about every creep that rises from the sewers of this city."* She had tapped his keyboard. *"And they can find us, Tom. You know they can."*

"Ann."

"You back off. Pull away. You're getting too close. You go to Sydowski and give it up."

"Ann, please."

"Tom, you're not a cop."

"Ann, this is huge."

She had taken his face in her hands.

"That's just it, don't you see? You get the story, but we pay the price for it."

"Annie, don't do this. Please."

Her eyes filled with fear as she searched his. They knew each other well enough to know he couldn't give up this story. Not now. That was a cold, hard fact.

"All right," she had said. *"I'll take Zach to Newport Beach for a few*

days."

"Ann."

"No, it'll be fine, Tom. It's a good time. Lana's been bugging me to come. We'll go to Disneyland, or something. You stay here and finish what you started."

"You're sure?"

"Just promise me you'll be careful."

He had nodded. She had kissed him, then left him there staring at the pictures of Carla Purcell's murder.

Reed turned in his chair now, sitting there unshaven in his sweatpants and T-shirt, in need of a shower, breakfast, and coffee. But he kept working because he was not going to Sydowski with this information. Not yet. He needed to work on it. Who knew where it could lead? It was shaping up to be a national story. Secretly Reed envisioned one of the pictures stretched across the front page. The home movies of a serial killer at work. He shuddered. They had to stop this guy. To take this thing any further Reed was going to need help. From the inside.

Wyatt.

He was a computer cop. He was part of the investigation. And he owed Reed.

FIFTY-FIVE

Wyatt forced himself to push aside Iris Wood's case as he drove to Olivia's house for dinner.

Face the truth. You're not part of that file. You never were. Sydowski hammered it home. They don't want you.

And so far he had struck out on his secret computer probe. Gricks was right, whoever was behind it was good. Coming at him head-on would be like flying into the sun.

Wyatt couldn't prove a link between the killer and Iris Wood's computer. His suspicions had been diminished by Sydowski's case status meeting. He had to admit Sydowski was a hell of a detective. He had twenty-one suspects, he was searching rental cars, was consulting other police departments, had submitted the file to VICAP.

Tom Reed at the *Star* knew more about the case than he did. Wyatt was so far out of the loop, he couldn't even see it. And by putting the FBI on Iris Wood's computer, Sydowski made it clear that nobody in the SFPD counted Wyatt among them. After all this time, he was still being shunned, still paying the price for Reggie Pope's shooting. Nothing had changed. They didn't believe him. They never would. Never.

One person believed him.

Wyatt reached for the tiny gift-wrapped box, with the elegant bow, in the seat beside him as he parked in front of Olivia's big Edwardian house.

The gate squeaked as he entered the yard, a breeze hissed through the trees carrying the softest sounds of music. Wyatt went to the rear where the music got louder. He stopped near a large shrub. It was Olivia. He saw her through the open kitchen window. Standing there watching her, a feeling came over him. She looked so good. Concentrating, slicing vegetables while the music played. At that point he knew he had fallen in love with Olivia. She believed him. She had accepted him. Had healed him. He felt stronger, ready to face whatever fate was holding for him because he would always have this moment.

Dinner was chicken Kiev. Dessert was Olivia's homemade apple pie. It was the best meal Wyatt had eaten in a long, long time. Later, they sat on her rear porch sipping wine, enjoying the quiet.

"Olivia, do you ever think about what it would be like to have kids, have a family?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Curious."

"Yes," she said over her wine glass. "It would be wonderful to have

children."

"You would be a wonderful mother."

"What about you? Ever think of being a dad?"

"Sure. I think of all the dad things like Little League. Fishing. My dad and I built the coolest soap box racer when I was ten. Painted it sapphire."

"What about diapers, braces, and tummy aches that keep them up all night?"

"All part of the job."

As the evening darkened and they refilled their wine glasses, Wyatt figured the time was right to reach into his pocket for the small gift-wrapped box.

"I got you a little something."

Olivia was taken by surprise, opening her present, a necklace with a fine gold chain. It sparkled in the evening light.

"Ben, it's beautiful!" She blushed, "Help me put it on."

They stood, Olivia turning so he could fasten the clasp at the back of her neck. Then she kissed his cheek. They remained on the porch, finishing their wine, gazing up at the half-moon rising.

"Guess we're a couple now, huh, dear?" Olivia giggled.

"Guess so."

"You know, Ben. Things have been good for me since we met. It's been nice. You know what I mean?"

"It's been nice for me too."

"I've just been feeling good about things. Like, I've just decided to visit my only relatives. My mom's sister in Chicago. I haven't seen them in years."

"That's great. When are you going?"

"In a few days. Just a short trip."

"That's good. I'm glad."

Olivia set down her wine glass. "Come on. I'll give you a tour of the whole house." She grabbed Wyatt's hand.

Olivia showed him every room, including the top-floor turret with its huge window offering the view of San Francisco's skyline and the bridges. They kissed there as the lights of the city twinkled. Then she showed him each of the five bedrooms. The last one on the tour was hers.

Wyatt liked how the room smelled good, liked its huge bay windows, the king-size bed. He saw her computer on the desk.

"You go on-line much from home?" Wyatt checked out her PC.

"A little. You know, chat rooms. Like pen pal stuff for shy people." She grinned, twisting the necklace he gave her.

"Be careful. Never give out personal data. You never know who's lurking out there."

"Yes, Officer, I'm careful. I mostly use it to do orders for Caselli's from here."

Wyatt spotted the printouts of news stories about Reggie Pope's

shootings. He stared at Olivia with a question written on his face.

"Ben." She stepped closer. "I just wanted to learn more about you, how they treated you."

He saw understanding in her eyes as he took her into his arms, pulling her to him. They kissed, a long, deep kiss. Olivia pulled him closer to her bed.

The computer whirred and twilled as quietly as a cobra.

A new message was coming for livinsf.

FIFTY-SIX

Les Brinkhaus set down his mug of early morning coffee next to his terminal. His extension rang. It was his supervisor.

"Stand by, Les. Going to get you to run some ad hoc queries for a fresh one from the West."

"All right."

Brinkhaus was an MCS, a major case specialist, with the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, headquartered within the Critical Incident Response Group, known as the CIRG building, at the academy in Quantico. The unit hummed with soft conversations, clicking keyboards, phones, as some thirty-five FBI crime analysts queried the massive stand-alone computer database for serial links among violent crimes across the country. The program divided the nation into six regions, E-1, E-2, E-3, for the eastern half; W-1, W-2, W-3 for the west, with supervisory agents and crime analysts assigned to each region.

Brinkhaus handled "specials" and was the coordinator for all ViCLAS queries the Royal Canadian Mounted Police made to the FBI's program, which allowed the two agencies to compare U.S. and Canadian cases.

The retired veteran Memphis homicide detective loved the work. "Keeps the gray matter active," he told friends from Tennessee. Although, Brinkhaus admitted, he spent much of his time convincing detectives *all over the damned place* that their information was safe, that his job was to find similarities and put investigators in touch with each other. *"Hell, son, I worked homicide for nineteen years, you don't have to tell me how precious your hold-back is. It's sacred. Wouldn't trust it to the Lord himself. I know. But you got to ask yourself, when you look into the eyes of the victim's family, can you honestly tell them, 'Yes, I tried everything to solve it, I swear. Everything,' and then sleep at night?"*

The FBI loved Brinkhaus for his near evangelical commitment to the program. Brinkhaus, a natural southern charmer, liked working with detectives across America and the RCMP, a fine, world-class police force, he would tell the other VICAP analysts.

He took a hit of what passed for coffee, reflecting on the recent unsolved Canadian case Art Lardner submitted over the encrypted fax. As requested, Brinkhaus had queried the key physical evidence, the shoe impressions and some letters thought to be airport codes. Nothing yet. But he was constantly comparing the file on the U.S. data bank. In fact, he was starting one when his line rang. Again, it was his supervisor.

"All right, Les. It's coming from San Francisco. Should be there now.

Here's the file number. They think they got a traveler. See what you can do."

Brinkhaus keyed in his security key codes to the file submitted by Inspector Walter Sydowski, SFPD. He'd heard of that guy. A legend. *Okay, partner, what do we have?* Brinkhaus was quick, went right to the evidentiary mode, key fact: "shoe impressions. The descriptive BWI -- for Baltimore-Washington International.

Brinkhaus's eyes widened ever so slightly over his bifocals. He immediately went to the Canadian case, which had the descriptive *B* and forensic theory, the short airport code list of possibles including BWI for Baltimore-Wash --

"Gotcha!"

Brinkhaus reached for his phone, punching the area code, to call the RCMP.

"Lardner."

"Art, you know that case of yours with the descriptive letter?"

"Yeah, you got something for us?"

"I have a possible match. Real similar case in San Francisco. Let me reach out to the PD there and have him get in touch with you. Stand by."

Brinkhaus called the San Francisco homicide detail. They patched his call through to Sydowski at home. He was in the aviary when it came.

"Sydowski."

Brinkhaus could hear chirping.

"Inspector, Les Brinkhaus, VICAP Quantico."

"Yeah."

What's with the birds? Was the guy in the forest?

"I think we have a case very similar to yours."

"That right? Where?"

"In Canada."

"Canada? What's the match?"

"Look, we protect everyone's file. Here's the number for the RCMP contact, Art Lardner. He'll give you the case investigator. It's a fresh homicide. You guys should talk."

"Thanks, Les."

Reesor was driving home with his son from a Bulls-Raptors game when his cell phone rang. He called Sydowski from a pay phone while his son cranked up the radio in the car. It took four minutes for the two detectives, separated by a border and three time zones, to feel each other out and decide now was the time to pull out all the stops; it only took sixty seconds for them to agree Iris Wood and Belinda Holcomb were murdered by the same man.

Their cases matched on several points. Victims: SWF; murder scene: public, shoe impressions made by a Colossal Sports Strider, male size 11. Airport code for BWI. Both were quiet types who went on-line from home.

Sydowski sent Reesor his suspect list with twenty-one names and a copy of the shoe impression. Reesor sent Sydowski the shoe impression found at the murder scene in the Toronto theater.

Reesor and Winslow checked the twenty-one names with Toronto hotels and struck out in the first call-around. One hour later, a manager called back. The Palace Arms near the airport.

"Detective Reesor, a room was reserved using the credit card matching one of the names you supplied us. But another person took the room, paid cash."

"Fax me all the names, dates, credit card information."

Reesor got Winslow to alert their boss for a warrant to search the hotel room for prints or trace. Reesor then called San Francisco.

"We got a hit from your list: Harlan Wells, Maryland," Reesor told Sydowski. "But a Foster Dean of Washington D.C., took the room. The dates put both names here for the murder. Likely aliases. We'll check the names with her employer, neighborhood, and try some other things."

"Okay, Reesor this is good. We'll get working on this at our end."

In San Francisco, the SFPD located the car rented from United Coast by Harlan Wells of Laurel, Maryland. A judge signed a warrant for them to impound the vehicle, a new blue Ford Taurus. It was transported to Hunter's Point where crime scene techs scoped it. Horace Meeker from the lab assisted as they scoured it for any trace evidence. Sydowski studied the photographs of Harlan Wells, looking hard into his eyes and the scars on his face. Calls had been placed with the Maryland MVA. Details on the names had been entered into NCIC. Sydowski sent Reesor photos of Harlan Wells from his Maryland driver's license and security camera at the United Coast rental outlet at San Francisco International.

In Toronto, Detective Jackie Winslow had credit card confirmation that a Foster Dean had flown from Toronto directly to Calgary within four hours of Belinda Holcomb's murder. A Harlan Wells had rented a car and then a room at the Timberrock Hotel in Banff.

"Jackie, call the car rental agency at the Calgary Airport. Get the particulars. See if the car's still out, get the VIN, tag, run the vehicle through CPIC. We'll alert the RCMP in Banff."

Within fifteen minutes a CPIC dispatcher in Ottawa called Reesor.

"The subject's vehicle was stopped by RCMP outside Sparwood."

"British Columbia?"

"Yes." The dispatcher gave Reesor the time, date, the Mountie's name and regimental number. "The driver was cited for "Section 146, sub three of the B.C. Motor Vehicles Act." The dispatcher was reading from a computer

screen.

"Speeding?" Reesor said.

"Right. Exceeding posted limit. No ticket issued."

"The operator?"

"Eugene Vryke, 3466 Cromley in Hyattsville, Maryland. Want DOB and particulars?"

"Yes, send me the data. Can you query NCIC?"

Reesor called the Sparwood RCMP detachment and asked for the member who had stopped Vryke.

"That's Allan Krell. He's on patrol about thirty minutes away."

Reesor explained the urgency. His call was patched through the radio to Constable Krell's car. He agreed to return to his office immediately and compare the photos of Harlan Wells and Eugene Vryke. When Reesor hung up, Winslow had more news.

"Marty," her hand was over her phone's mouthpiece. The suspect's rental car was dropped off last night at the agency's outlet in downtown Vancouver."

"Last night? Get them to grab the car, Jackie. I'll alert Vancouver homicide and the Mounties out there."

After completing his calls, Reesor called Sydowski. "Walt, Reesor here. Our guy may still be in Canada. Dropped off a rental last night in Vancouver.

"We've got several good latents from his trunk. See who they belong to."

"Try the name Eugene Vryke." He spelled it. "I'll send you particulars."

"How's that name come up?"

"Harlan Wells rented a car out of Calgary. RCMP made a traffic stop on the rental driven by Eugene Vryke, 3466 Cromley in Hyattsville, Maryland. Here's -- hold on --"

Winslow was on the line with Constable Krell in Sparwood, nodding emphatically to Reesor. "Sparwood says Vryke and Wells are the same guy."

"Walt, the Mountie who made the stop confirms that Vryke and Wells are the same guy."

Sydowski weighed the situation. In a short time, they had gone from a galaxy of suspects to one. A moment passed as the two detectives considered their next step.

"We're less than twenty-four hours behind him, Marty."

"We've got his picture."

"We should release it, safeguard the public, ask for help, turn up the heat." Sydowski stared at the board and Vryke's face. "I got a feeling he wants to come home," he said. "Better alert our border people."

FIFTY-SEVEN

Eugene Vryke sat in a right-side window seat, of the wide-body Eagle coach as it rolled south out of Vancouver along British Columbia's Highway 99 to the border at Blaine, Washington, some twenty-five miles away.

The forty-seven-seat charter bus was filled with sports fans bound for Seattle's Safeco Field where the Mariners were playing the L.A. Dodgers.

A boy about 16 was in the seat next to him, part of a father-and-two-son delegation. The younger sibling across the narrow aisle was about twelve, well-behaved and well supplied with red hair and freckles like the snoring dad. The teen was reading *Sports Illustrated.*

Vryke gazed upon the flowers of Peace Arch Provincial Park, knowing that as his time drew near, he had become sloppy. More vulnerable. It had almost ended for him when the traffic cop stopped him in the mountains. But it didn't. If he could return safely to the United States and complete the critical details for his final meeting, he would succeed.

He must succeed. He could not afford to fail. Time was running out.

Traffic was congesting. Lanes choked with southbound big rigs, RVs, cars, vans. The Blaine crossing was one of the busiest between the two countries. The bus's big Detroit engine growled and its Jake brakes hissed as they began inching their way to the U.S. border, now less than a quarter of a mile away.

Vryke finished filling out a U.S. Customs declaration form then eased his tension by drumming his fingers on the canvas bag carrying his laptops. He glimpsed the freckle-faced teen turning another page. *Remember this day, kid, it guarantees you a place in history as the guy who sat next to Eugene Vryke.*

At that moment in Washington, D.C., a short distance from the White House, an urgent call came from the RCMP to the Office of Enforcement at U.S. Customs headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue.

The alert concerned an extremely dangerous murder suspect, believed to be preparing to enter the United States from Canada at Washington State. It was immediately sent to the coordinator of the U.S. Customs Northern Border Office for processing.

In British Columbia, near the Peace Arch, traffic was gridlocked on the southbound lanes awaiting clearance for entry by U.S. border officials.

Turn signals blinking, the Seattle-bound Eagle charter belched a black diesel cloud as it maneuvered into the dedicated bus lanes. Flags of the United States and Washington State flapped above the U.S. port buildings. Rooftop and driver-level security cameras eyed traffic, sentry cameras recorded rear license plates. As the bus crept closer to the U.S. checkpoint, the driver popped open the door. A U.S. Customs officer wearing dark glasses and an all-business attitude boarded.

"Everyone please disembark with your luggage and we'll process you as quickly as we can in this building behind me. When you get inside, U.S. citizens to the right, others to the left. Please have identification and completed declaration forms handy. Be prepared to have your belongings inspected and declare the nature of your visit to the United States."

In Washington, at the U.S. Customs Northern Border Office, staff members were processing the details of the alert, containing criminal intelligence supplied by the FBI, SFPD, Toronto Police Service, and the RCMP.

It was flagged urgent for the immediate arrest of Eugene Vryke, a suspect sought for murders in the U.S. and Canada. The alert's history showed that Vryke, believed to be a U.S. resident of Maryland, was traveling in the Vancouver area and bound for the U.S. It listed his DOB, race, height, weight, eye and hair color. It included the aliases Foster Dean and Harlan Wells and two photographs. One from a Maryland driver's license and one from the United Coast car rental security camera at San Francisco International.

"Let's get this out to Blaine preclearance at Vancouver International, and Amtrak," a supervisor said.

Struggling with bags, griping about the delay, the charter's passengers lumbered into the processing building, lining up as instructed. They passed the wait discussing baseball.

When his turn came, Vryke placed his small luggage bag and canvas computer bag on one of the large tables as requested by a female Customs officer.

"Mind opening this one for me, sir?" About thirty. Short-cropped blond hair. Small gold rings in her pierced ears. "Can you please turn on your computers for me?"

Vryke complied and the machines beeped to life. Each screen displayed a high-definition, action, animated video of major league baseball.

"What's this, sir?" She touched his satellite phone and collapsed dish.

"Satellite phone. I'm a freelance journalist. I was filing travel stories from the Rockies to U.S. clients. Want to see one?"

"No, thanks. You can close it up and go to the officer at the desk. He'll

want to see your ID. Give him your form."

Vryke took his place in the line before a U.S. border officer, sitting on a high stool at a podium desk behind a computer terminal. Behind the officer, Vryke could see his bus and passengers returning. He was third in line. The officer was examining IDs, asking short questions. Through the building's windows Vryke saw two RCMP patrol cars, two Mounties talking to several U.S. officers. He tried to make out the cars. INS maybe? County? Customs?

"Next."

It was Vryke's turn.

The officer was a balding man in his forties. Frameless glasses, pencil-thin moustache and dark blue eyes that were quick as he accepted Vryke's U.S. identification and Customs form. Studying it, he keyed his computer. It beeped a response when he entered the name of Dennis Delmarcario.

"Returning from vacation?"

The computer continued beeping.

"Yes."

Vryke could see his bus less than twenty yards behind the officer who was scrutinizing his computer screen. He glanced at Delmarcario's photograph, then at Vryke, looking him in the eye. Same person. The officer started passing the documents back when his terminal beeped. A small icon flashed indicating an incoming hot alert. The records snapped back.

"One minute, sir."

Vryke's pulse quickened. Through the window he saw the small police posse, bulked with kevlar, holstered pistol handles protruding, the computer beeping. The border officer at the desk reaching for his phone.

Vryke swallowed.

"Yeah, Cal, it's me. The darn thing's seized on an incoming --"

"Excuse me! But we're going to miss our game!" someone complained from the line behind Vryke. The officer was deaf to it. "…Yeah, Cal. You have to reset it now. Right. We're backed up good."

The officer hung up and gave Vryke his papers. "Welcome back to the U.S., sir."

In Seattle, Vryke found a cheap motel, paid cash for one night after registering with a new alias.

He had to hurry. The previous night in his Vancouver hotel, he had felt the onset of a seizure but managed to suppress it with an injection before it overwhelmed him with convulsions.

The room reeked of beer and cigarettes. The walls vibrated with loud music from the downstairs bar. Vryke tossed his bag on the bed. No time to lose. He switched on his computers, made the necessary adjustments to go on-line. As his systems fired up, Vryke leafed through the Seattle yellow pages; then his keyboard began clicking, a small grin cutting into his face, as he

found exactly what he needed. Making some notes on the motel's takeout menu. On-line, he checked the schedules for the next day's flights on Five Star Skyways to Baltimore. There was one in the morning. There were seats available. Good. He'd buy a ticket at the counter at the last minute. Vryke then made a few phone calls.

He sensed the police were getting close. He was tempted to enter their systems but he had to refrain. If he kept ahead of them he could succeed. He just had to be smart, avoid being sloppy. He checked the news wires and local newspapers, especially for Toronto and San Francisco, see if they were gaining on him. Nothing so far. He went to a hidden compartment in the liner of one of his bags, removing his kit for the morning. The wig, dye kit, the contact lenses to change his eye color. New glasses. He rubbed his upper lip. The moustache was filling in. Vryke went to the washroom, shaved his head, trimmed his eyebrows.

Before he went to sleep that night, he sat alone in his darkened room, the scars of his face bathed in the glow of his computer screen as he comforted himself on-line with her words to him after he asked if there was anyone who could truly forgive the sins of a past life.

She responded: *I am the one.*

Tears spilled from his eyes as he wrote to her.

Now I have the courage. I'll never be alone again. Thank you, livinsf.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Twenty-four hours.

We're only a day behind you. Sydowski grimaced at Vryke's face. *Soon, everyone will know you.*

In a few days, once they confirmed more vital information and obtained arrest warrants, police in San Francisco and Toronto would go public with short news conferences identifying Vryke as a dangerous fugitive wanted for homicides in both cities. They would release his photos, aliases, a brief summary, and little else. Vital hold-back wouldn't be released. They were at a critical point in their pursuit now, Sydowski thought, crunching on Tums tablets and rubbing his tired eyes. He had slept less than four hours since yesterday's VICAP break in the case. He had polished off a takeout order of a BLT, fries, gravy, and a large milk at his desk. Now he was dealing with his heartburn, files, notes, calls and hunches.

Vancouver city had put a team of detectives on it. Their forensic people were scouring the rental for latents. Checking the aliases with hotels and motels. The Mounties were doing the same throughout British Columbia's Lower Mainland. So far, no homicides with his signature in metro Vancouver. Sydowski saw that Toronto had not discovered any trace or prints in the Palace Arms hotel. Clean.

In Alberta, the RCMP dispatched investigators from Major Crimes South to the Banff hotel where he had registered under an alias. The hotel staff reported that guests had complained of *"a loud disturbance in the middle of the night"* coming from the room. The Mounties immediately secured the room, roused a judge for a warrant, then paged the IDENT section out of Calgary subdivision.

Was he at work there?

Sydowski had heard nothing new so far. Nothing from U.S. Customs, who had flashed the bulletin from Blaine to Maine, alerting U.S. border officials at the nearly 150 northern points of entry, all airports, train stations, crossings and ferry terminals. Nothing from the FBI. Nothing new on any of the known credit cards. All we have is that he had returned a rental in Vancouver and vanished.

In the East, the FBI was working the names and addresses in the metro D.C. area, shaking down all the District, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania possibilities. As expected they were dead ends. The feds were also running the aliases and details against Social Security numbers, trying to lock on to true information. So far nothing.

Turgeon put down her phone. "The techs from Crime Scene and Horace

are finished with his United Coast Taurus. They've faxed a report over from Hunter's Point. Here it is."

Turgeon retrieved it from the machine, shaking her head as it dispensed the last page. "Looks like nothing that could be his. Hold on, Walt." She lifted a page, then another, before passing it to Sydowski.

The report said the arches, whorls and loops of the latents showed more than fourteen minutiae points similar to the fingerprints of Iris May Wood, resulting in a match. A faxed B/W crime scene photo showed her prints in the dark, silvery fingerprint powder smeared on the door handle, window, armrest, wall, indicating the moment of terror and her futile struggle. Sydowski looked long and hard at the photo.

In Canada, in the Banff hotel room where Vryke had battled death, an RCMP forensic expert was looking for any evidence of a crime. Housekeeping staff had checked their files. Nothing unusual about the room after the suspect left. It was actually very tidy, according to the woman who had remade it. That made the detectives suspicious. The room appeared spotless and had a pleasant smell as the Mountie prepared a two-gallon jug of water, sodium perborate, sodium carbonate, and luminol. She attached a small sprayer, pulled the curtains, switched off the lights, darkening the room before she began applying the solution to the clean walls, glistening tub, and sink. The process, known as chemical luminescence, would detect any blood a suspect may have wiped clean, invisible to the naked eye. Once the solution contacts blood, it reacts, glowing blue in the dark, *as it did now, in huge large smears on the bathroom wall, ghostly twelve-inch letters rising in the dark as the Mountie continued spraying, her face hidden behind a surgical mask, her eyes behind her goggles reading the words scrawled on the wall in blood:*

I WILL SHOW YOU PAIN

At that moment in Baltimore, the FBI Special Agent coordinating the Vryke investigation in the area telephoned Sydowski directly.

"Inspector, we just heard from our Seattle field office, Foster Dean purchased a last-minute one-way ticket at the Five Star Skyways counter at Sea-Tac International this morning."

"Where to?"

"Baltimore. Landed approximately four hours ago."

"He was on the flight?"

"Five Star Skyways confirms. The ticket was used."

Sydowski hung up.

Four hours behind you now.

FIFTY-NINE

Vryke bought a full-fare ticket at Five Star Skyways' counter at Seattle International. In the pre-boarding area he surveyed the groggy passengers with their takeout coffees, water bottles, newspapers. *There is always one who leaves their ticket in a vulnerable position.*

He found him.

Cowboy hat, jeans, boots, large belt buckle, a trucker type. Arms folded. Eyes closed. On the adjacent seat, his ticket was peeking from a small bag with a rolled up *USA Today.* Vryke plopped next to him, sending it all spilling to the floor.

"Sorry, friend. I'll get it."

Vryke clumsily gathered the man's belongings, including his ticket to Baltimore which Vryke quickly switched with Foster Dean's ticket, slipping it unnoticed into the stranger's ticket folder. The cowboy nodded then yawned. *Perfect.* Five Star's computers would confirm Foster Dean was on the Baltimore-bound plane, Vryke thought later during the boarding call as he casually walked in the opposite direction of the departure gate.

He entered a restroom to ditch Foster Dean's credit card in an empty stall, pausing when he happened upon the words: *God's plan for Salvation,* on a soaked pamphlet draped over the rim of a toilet. *You do work in mysterious ways, don't you?*

Vryke appraised his reflection in the mirror; dark red hair, red moustache, thinned eyebrows, different eye color and glasses. Not bad, he thought before heading for Boeing Field, and Golden Airstream VIP Charters. The company offered 'One-hour Readiness On Demand' and Vryke chartered a small jet for Neil Chattersly, vice-president of CiceroComputrex. It cost a few thousand dollars on the company card.

Emergency business.

He buckled in to one of the aircraft's luxurious leather-bound chairs. A single attendant offered him a pastry and coffee. The pilot and co-pilot were friendly and professional. "Sit back and relax, Mr. Chattersly. We'll have you in San Francisco in no time at all."

As the jet leveled, Vryke felt two forces closing in on him: death and detectives. But as he looked at the endless blue sky and the Pacific, he was confident he would triumph. For he had found her. She would forgive him unconditionally and she would be his for all eternity.

I am the one.

Their meeting would be magnificent. He envisioned it, and every glorious thing he knew of her. How she would be working so near to Forever

& Ever, in a gift shop with chiming transom bells. He had visualized her warm eyes, her kind face and pure heart. She'd been there all this time, dispensing the virtues, sympathy, gratitude and *forgiveness,* in the form of a card for a few dollars each.

She was *The One.*

Many times in his mind he had pictured her large uphill house near Twin Peaks overlooking the twinkling lights of the city. Its perfect yard, its mature trees nodding in a breeze under a moon gliding through satin clouds. He had imagined his hands on the wrought iron of the front gate, the soft grass of the manicured lawn under his shoes. He had even envisaged the fading sirens rising up from the Mission below and how he would find her Edwardian house armed with a VigilShield electronic surveillance home security system that he could easily disarm. How the thick shrubs in the darkness would allow him to work undetected at a rear basement window. He imagined slipping on his omni-scope night-vision goggles that would read the ambient light, transform it into eerie monochrome images. He envisioned setting down his small bag of tools in silence because each was wrapped in a towel. He envisioned easily removing the steel prowler bars from the window, quietly cutting the glass, replacing it all carefully upon entering her basement so it appeared untouched.

He had imagined how he would take his time to find his way quietly to the main floor, pausing on each step, emerging in her kitchen that would be so fragrant with fresh flowers as he moved into the living room.

He had visualized the pendulum, heard it ticking in the grandfather clock as he padded up the staircase, moving with utmost care as he checked each room, until he found hers, light with her scent, a mild mixture of soap, lavender, and perfume. He imagined stopping to savor it.

He had pictured himself entering her room like a dream, seeing her computer on the desk in the corner, the very vehicle through which she had dispatched her promise to deliver him from all the sins of his past life and eternal damnation. How with utmost reverence, he would caress its keyboard. Then he saw himself turning to find her asleep on her large bed.

That is how he had imagined it would be.

Now Vryke was basking in the reward of his cyber intrusion into every facet of her life. After landing, he had rented a car, checked into a motel, waited for night, then made his way to her hilltop home and their destiny. In all the pain-filled years he had spent searching the world, he had ached to know this moment; had envisioned it in a million dreams.

No need to dream anymore.

It was now real.

He was here. Lit with the glory of The One.

Looking down upon Olivia Grant asleep in her bed, breezes parting the

window's curtains heralding the night sky to paint her with moonlight. Standing there, an other-worldly apparition in his dark hooded coveralls, his infrared glasses, holding his breath behind his surgical mask. Enraptured. His heart ascended as her face turned to him. Behold, the sorrow and the pity, the grace she held for him. Divine Forgiveness.

It brought Vryke to his knees.

He dared to move his face near to hers, his tiny camera lenses recording the final chapter.

He reached out to touch her, his hand mere inches from her cheek when he refrained, holding himself dead still for several moments, creating a portrait of beauty and pain. Vryke blinked back his tears. His search had ended. His mission fulfilled. They would be together forever. Without a sound, the fingers of his latex gloves reached into his bag, feeling the injection kit, bypassing it for the big towel.

The surgical bone saw.

The Spitteler 4000. Custom made in Zurich. Ordered from OrthoSuisee Instruments off the Web. Its twelve-inch carbon-treated steel blade, designed for quick clean amputation of large bones, glinted in the night as Vryke unwrapped it, gripped its sculpted pistol handle fiercely with his right hand and lowered the instrument one inch over Olivia's exposed neck.

Lining it up, adrenaline pumping, his heart thumping. *Two strokes.* With every ounce of his strength. Outward, then inward, full bore sawing motions. He coached himself. It would be quick. She would feel nothing. The blade would saw out, slicing through veins, arteries, trachea, and esophagus, biting into the cervical vertebra, severing it cleanly on the backstroke. The Spitteler 4000 was amazingly effective on the stray animals he had tested it on.

Two strokes.

As long as she did not open her eyes.

What if she opened her eyes, Eugene?

His fingers began tingling. A seizure? No. An electric current rattled his skull, instantly launching a thousand pictures from his life swirling at the speed of light in the portions of his brain uneaten by the acid.

Vryke a boy again in Galveston the night of the crash. Vryke lying in the hospital bed feeling the light, hearing the heartbroken nurses, feeling their warm tears falling upon his shredded face.

They do not sting. The tears of angels.

"His father will make it. His mother won't. Did the ambulance guys tell you what happened to him?"

Vryke was catapulted from the rear through the windshield face-first, sliding on the road for some thirty yards, conscious when his mother slid next to him.

"Oh, Lord, that poor child."

But they did not know the rest of the story. No one knew. No one would ever believe it.

Vryke grinding to a halt on the road. His mother rolls next to him, her head coming to a stop a yard away.

But only her head.

Her eyes open. Her mouth moving.

No. This can't be.

The web of blood and tissue curtained over his eyes. Is he seeing this?

Her mouth working, eyes meeting his, gurgling sounds becoming words. The smell of the alcohol, she is still drunk. No, please. She is speaking, words are coming from her mouth "You're a mess, Eugene! A goddamned mess! Look at you! I never wanted you! Everything is your fault!"

No, Mother no. Please. It can't be. It's shock. A traumatic illusion, hallucination. Oh, God. Stop it.

They found him screaming at her head.

Stop it.

You leave me alone.

Two strokes. Two quick strokes and she is gone. Gone forever. Replaced by forgiveness.

I am the one.

Take her into eternity with you now.

Two strokes.

The Spitteler's blade tremored above Olivia's neck.

Do it. Now.

An electrical current jolted in his brain, signalling a seizure. No. He blinked, feeling his fingers sweating in the latex gloves tightening on the bone saw's handle, his feet pressing into the floor, his body tensing to deliver all his strength.

Do it now.

Two strokes.

The phone on the nightstand rang.

No! He had forgotten the phone!

It rang again. Olivia stirred, groaning, rolling away suddenly, just missing the Spitteler.

"Hello."

Vryke stepped into the darkness, able to hear snatches of the caller's loud voice in the silence.

"VigilShield…problem showing...dispatching a car..."

Within one minute Vryke had flown quietly to the basement, climbed quickly through the window, replaced the glass and bars, left her yard through the rear, then using his modified cell phone/hand computer, reactivated the home-security system.

A few blocks away he sat on a park bench, seeing a VigilShield van turn in the direction of the house.

Vryke raised his face to the stars, drawing his breath slowly, reaching into his bag for his kit. He injected himself before the seizure advanced, then

remained on the bench for a long time, letting his heart rate come down.

How could he have been so sloppy? How could he miss something so simple? And how could forget the phone? What else had he overlooked? *Go back now.* No. He couldn't. Not tonight. He was weak. So weak.

Then he remembered.

In her bedroom. The half-packed bag. Airline itinerary.

She was leaving.

No. This can't be. No. Easy. But he was running out of time. *Breathe easy. Think.* He could deal with it. If he worked effectively. He had come so far. He had searched the world.

She was destined to go with him.

SIXTY

Reed stepped from the afternoon light into the cool darkness of a bar a few blocks from Pier 39, a hangout for police informants. He slid the bartender a ten-dollar bill, used the bar phone to call Wyatt's pager. When the phone rang five minutes later, the bartender answered, then passed it to Reed.

"Got a message to call 'Joe' at this number."

"Yeah, Wyatt, it's Reed."

"What the hell do you want?"

"I've got to see you. I've got more data."

"This is a bad time."

"I think you should see this stuff."

"What is it?"

"Got to show you."

"Reed --"

"You can see it now in time to make use of it, or see it on the front page of the *Star.* Your call, Ben."

"Go to Sydowski."

"It's computer related."

"What is it?"

"Could be the key to locking on to this guy." Reed was going to nudge him with a "you owe me," but held off. "Come on, Ben."

"Public Library, main branch. Fiction section. Near the books by Faulkner. In one hour."

Reed found Wyatt at a table, flipping through a tattered hardcover edition of *As I Lay Dying.*

"You've got one minute, so get to the point."

Reed sat across from Wyatt, pulled out a brown envelope, slid him the e-mail printout from Carla Purcell's file in Las Vegas, explained what it was. Wyatt read the note.

Dear CP:
I just have to know, if you found the right man, could you forgive him the sins of his past life?

"All right, so?"

Reed told him what happened when the *Star's* computer tech, Sebastian

Tan, had tried some sleuthing, then slid copies of the three stills of Carla Purcell and the *Pieta.*

Wyatt studied the murder pictures. "Did these come up on the screen?"

Reed nodded. "Tan is good. But when he knocked on this guy's door, something was unleashed that nearly blew up our entire system. Then this weird thing happened. It was like a home video recording came up during the meltdown and I printed the stills from the screen before it all vanished."

Wyatt studied everything again. "What is it you want, Reed?"

"Confirmation on the photos. If I call Vegas, they won't tell me. But *you* could find out. Look. The blood drops for tears under the statue's eyes. It's likely hold-back."

"Reed, I can't do that."

"I am ninety-nine per cent sure the man who murdered Iris Wood murdered Carla Purcell. This is his work. Sydowski and the FBI have been talking to LV Metro. The women are so similar. Lonely, shy, searched for friends on-line. You're the computer whiz. Talk to the FBI, talk to your Valley experts. You know I'm right. He posed them. It's his signature and there's likely more victims out there and more to come."

"Tom, it's complicated."

"I'm going to break this thing wide open, Ben." Reed stood. "I've given you a key here. I'm just asking for a little help."

Reed left. When he looked back at Wyatt, he saw him studying the material.

When he returned to his desk in the newsroom, Reed listened to a voice-mail message from Molly Wilson.

"Hey, Brader called me again at home last night. I told him I was on the other line to my mother. Then he called back and left a message. Seriously, Tom, you were right, he's a creep in the first degree."

Reed went through his secret files on the murders of Iris Wood and Carla Purcell. Reviewed the notes, letting his thoughts form on how he would draft the story about the serial killer who murdered them.

Reed's line rang.

'Tom, it's Ellen Crenshaw, Zach's doctor. I got your message from this morning. Your suspicions about mice are correct. I got the test results. He's reacting to mouse droppings."

"Mouse droppings. I'll call an exterminator. We'll move him out of that room. We just renovated. That must've stirred something in the house. They're right above his bed."

"He hasn't suffered anything serious. We can give him something. He should be fine if you take those steps at home. Can you bring him in, say, next Thursday at noon?"

"Next Thursday at noon. I'll get Ann to call you. Thanks, Ellen."

Brader materialized at Reed's desk. His face was cold. "Mice? That's what you're investigating now?" Brader shook his head. In his hand, Reed saw a file with his Las Vegas expenses. His stomach tightened. Brader curled his forefinger, beckoning Reed to his office.

"Shut the door behind you, Tom."

Brader tossed the file on his desk, loosened his tie, put his hands on his hips and stared at his wall of personal glory, keeping his back to Reed.

"Tom, it hurts me to say this, but I called Folsom yesterday and did some checking on Donnie Ray Ball. I used to be a reporter, you know. Seems he has no relatives in Las Vegas, or anywhere in Nevada. What were you doing in Las Vegas? Why did you call Darlene Purcell on the company cell phone? I checked your phone records. Why did you call her?"

"She's related to a murder victim."

"A murder victim?"

"I was working on the Iris Wood murder. Following a good lead, following your instructions to break news."

"Enough. Tom, you lied to me. You misspent the paper's money. I checked with personnel and, just as I thought, this is a firing offence. Now before I delve deeper, to find out if its gambling, hookers or both" -- Brader turned, his mean eyes meeting Reed's -- "I'm going to suspend you indefinitely with the strong advice you start looking for a new job."

"You sure you want to do this? Don't you want to ask me what I found out in Las Vegas?"

"No, Tom." Brader shook his head sadly. "I would hope that at a time like this you would demonstrate a little more self-respect. No more fabrications, please. It's over for you."

"Just like that, Clyde?"

For half a second Brader's attention was distracted through his glass office to Wilson returning to her desk. He stood, his nostril's flaring and unconsciously patted his hair. "Yes, Tom. Just like that."

Reed returned to his desk uncertain where to go. What to do.

"Hi, Tom," Wilson said. "What's up?"

Reed's line rang. He stood there watching his phone ring.

Wilson was puzzled. "Aren't you going to get that, Tom?"

He snatched the receiver. "Reed."

"Tom, it's been a long time."

Reed was not in the mood. It took a few awkward moments of conversation before Reed realized it was a very critical source of his who worked with Treasury in Washington, D.C.

"I know you'll never let me forget that I still owe you for those Forty-niner tickets, Reed."

"Right."

"You asked me to keep an eye out for any alerts on that thing we discussed?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Well, I don't have all the details but this is coming to you one time. It seems an alert went to U.S. Customs for a dangerous suspect wanted for the homicides of two women. One in Toronto, Canada, the other in San Francisco."

"Toronto? Anything about Las Vegas?"

"No."

"Got a suspect's name?"

"No way. I know it's got flags all over it. FBI, RCMP. No details. I have no access to the thing and I wouldn't dare try. I heard from a friend of a friend."

"How old is it?"

"Less than forty-eight hours. So we even, pal?"

"Almost," Reed said, grabbing his jacket.

"Molly, I need a big confidential favor."

"All better, sad grumpy boy? That must've been a good call."

"Keep this under wraps for now, but get the library to run an urgent check on all Toronto papers and wire service for recent female homicides that might be similar to Iris Wood's. Single women, posed, or in a public place. You know. Call me on my cell the instant you find anything."

"What about my dilemma with you-know-who?"

"You still got his message to you?"

"Yes, it's creepy."

"Tell him to consider his family and to back off, or else copies of his call go to his wife, the editor of this paper, and your lawyer."

"Don't tell anybody about this, Tom."

"Sure. Got to go."

Wilson's call came when Reed was mounting the steps of the Hall of Justice.

"Belinda Holcomb. Office worker. Found murdered in a Toronto movie theater during a showing of *Romeo and Juliet.* Tom, it was less than two weeks after Iris Wood."

"She married? Boyfriends?"

"Hang on. Local papers did some nice features. No. She's a farm girl from a border town near Minnesota. Her father, Les Holcomb, says his daughter moved to Toronto years ago but always lived alone, kept to herself."

"What does the last story say on the case status?"

"No arrests. Investigation continues."

"Thanks. Molly."

Reed was turned away at the homicide detail and advised to wait for

Sydowski in the cafeteria. He sat there for nearly thirty minutes before Sydowski appeared and bought an orange. He joined Reed, all business, no smiles, his big thumbs ripping the skin from the fruit.

"What is it, Reed?"

"I know about Belinda Holcomb in the movie theater. The border alert. I know about Las Vegas, Carla Purcell, posed on the statue in the church. You're chasing a serial killer."

"Wow, that's a relief. Okay, thanks for sharing. Bye."

"Walt, I'm going to write about it."

Sydowski gritted his teeth as he tore the peeling away. "Are you, now?"

"I've got it nailed. I know the cases in Toronto, in Nevada."

A large vein in Sydowski's jawline pulsated. "You don't know shit."

Conversations nearby ceased. People stared.

Sydowski chewed on a large piece of orange, like a tiger ripping into its prey. When he finished he glared at Reed. "Now because of all we've endured together, I'm going to tell you this man-to-idiot. Got that? You would be wise -- Are you listening to me? You would be very wise to hold off a little longer because, as usual, your facts are just a little out of focus."

Reed steepled his fingers. "I don't think so, Walt."

Sydowski leaned toward Reed. "I told you from the get-go to stay with this one. It's bad."

"Right."

"That's right, it's worse than I thought." Sydowski stood to leave. "Now unfortunately, there is this little thing called freedom of the press to fuck up my case."

"Didn't Nixon say that?"

Sydowski leaned back into Reed. "Listen to me, wiseass. You hold off on your story and I'll help you later. If you write it now, people could die."

Reed said nothing.

"You understand, Reed?"

Sydowski went to the cash register display to buy some Tums, popping one in his mouth, shooting him a parting glare.

Alone, Reed exhaled slowly, Sydowski seemed genuinely worried, his words reverberating in his ears.

"It's worse than I thought."

SIXTY-ONE

They were coming up on two days since Foster Dean's jet had landed in Maryland.

Sydowski tossed his bifocals atop the files on Eugene Vryke blanketing his desk in the homicide detail. The squad room was humming with ringing phones and conversation of detectives working leads, scanning reports.

They were so close. Almost on top of him but they delayed the news conferences because of complications. The *Star* was splayed on Turgeon's desk. So far, not a word had been reported on Vryke's case but no one knew how long Reed would hold off.

Damn, he practically knew the entire file. How did he know what he knew about Carla Purcell and Belinda Holcomb? Is someone leaking to him at this critical point? Who would jeopardize everything? Who could be that stupid?

It was then that Sydowski considered Ben Wyatt, working in the far corner at Schrader's old desk, where Leo had parked him.

"I'll assign him to screen nut calls and you can keep an eye on him. Happy, dear?"

Sydowski looked at the big-case corkboard that had been wheeled to the center of the room. Photographs of Vryke were pinned to it, along with large detailed full-sized sketches of his shoe impressions. Absent were the critical VICAP details of hold-back, like the BWI tag and how the victims had been posed. *That* evidence had only been shared among primaries. It hadn't been released to anyone.

But summaries of the San Francisco, Las Vegas, Toronto, and a few other cases were posted. A lot of confidential data was in plain view of a lot of detectives in the room. Including Wyatt. And Wyatt knew Reed.

Sydowski stared at him, grinding on the remnants of his antacid tablets, thinking, watching Wyatt on the phone, taking notes.

Sydowski stood at Wyatt's desk, waiting until he finished on the phone.

"Where did you go the other day, Wyatt?"

"What?"

"The other day. You disappeared for about an hour. Told no one. Where did you go?"

"I went to the library to check on something."

"Because not long after you got back, I got a visit from Tom Reed, who recited to me practically every detail on the board here."

"Are you accusing me of something, Walt?"

"None of this information's been released yet."

"Well, he didn't get it from me."

"I want a straight answer, Wyatt." Sydowski's voice grew louder. "Have you been discussing this case with Tom Reed?"

"What's the problem here?" Lieutenant Gonzales appeared.

"Tom Reed came to me with inside information about the case a few hours after Wyatt stepped out. He's threatening to run a story."

Gonzales stared at Wyatt.

"I think Wyatt's his source, Leo. Reed was practically reading the board to me. Funny it all happened right after Wyatt disappeared for a bit."

Wyatt's eyes went to Gonzales, then Sydowski. "I don't leak information to the press, Walt."

"I want you off the case and out of here."

"Walt."

Sydowski noticed Wyatt's notepad then, hidden under a file folder. He saw what looked like a sketch of the Michelangelo statue with teardrops of blood under its eyes. He seized it.

"Christ, where did you get this stuff? It's from Las Vegas. What the hell?"

"I can explain. I met Reed. *He* had data from --"

"Leo, I want him off this case now!"

"Walt, you don't understand. This is critical and we should pass it to the FBI, it's computer stuff and I think --"

"You should be charged --"

"Lieutenant." The homicide detail receptionist hurried into the room. "FBI in Baltimore for you."

"Hold it, Leo. Before you take that, get him outta here. Now!"

"Walt, just let's all calm down here."

"Leo, he's a damned liability. He drew his weapon on a member of the detail."

The room fell silent. A paper clip dropped to the floor.

"He drew his weapon? Why hasn't it been reported, then?"

"Lieutenant, FBI says it's urgent"

Gonzales raised his hand like a cop stopping traffic.

"It's under investigation," Sydowski said.

"I've had it up to here with this crap, Walt. I want you to take a walk, then sit at your desk and go back to work. Ben, I want you to take the rest of the day off. Get out of here. I gotta separate you two."

"But, Lieutenant, this data I have will help us --"

"Lieutenant, the FBI --"

"Yes. One second. Ben. Everyone's going flat-out. We're all on edge. But we're close to him. We're beyond the on-line aspects of the case now. Far beyond it. We've got our act together and we'll go public ASAP before the bad guy goes to work again. So, Ben, please, just do as I ask. Go. I'll call you."

Wyatt had to pass Sydowski's desk on his way out. He stopped, stuck his

face within an inch of Sydowski's. "I did not leak to Reed. And there was a kid taken hostage when Reggie got shot."

"Just keep walking, Wyatt."

Thirty seconds later, Gonzales stepped from his office.

"Everyone, FBI's just linked Vryke to four, possibly five more homicides."

No one said a word.

"The reason they asked us to delay the news conference is the upside. They've locked on to a good address for Vryke. Near Hyattsville, Maryland. They have visual confirmation on him. FBI SWAT and locals will be operational on it within forty-five minutes."

Muted cheers and a few high fives rippled through the detail.

Sydowski looked at Iris Wood's face smiling at him.

Almost over.

SIXTY-TWO

The widow of the late Professor Milford, who had taught philosophy at the University of Maryland, lived in a sixteen-room brick and frame home on four acres tucked in a wooded section of the Hyattsville area, northeast of Washington, D.C.

Invisible from public view was the Milford's stone guest house, hidden deep in the southwest corner of the property, protected by dense stands of maples, azaleas, and oaks. Mrs. Milford rented it to quiet academic types.

"Like Eugene, who always keeps to himself, never is a bother, travels quite often to computer conferences."

That was the information Mike Sergersen, commander of the FBI's D.C. SWAT team, was digesting, along with blueprints, property plans and other notes, as his unit marshaled with locals at a vacant county warehouse.

Vryke's data was still classified. Nothing had been made public yet. Much of the newest information Sergersen was reading had been culled hastily from fresh NCIC, SFPD, Interpol, and RCMP hot sheets being used to prepare Vryke's fugitive file. He was about to top the ten-most-wanted list becoming the target of the nation's largest manhunt.

"…suspect is sought in five homicides in the U.S.A., one in Canada, one in the United Kingdom, one in France, one in Japan. Should be considered extremely dangerous and approached with extreme caution…"

NCIC I.O., 5346-6-12-02. Vryke had some forty-one aliases, used nine Social Security Numbers. So far they had locked onto twenty-three different addresses, in the Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Virginia area, the majority of which were mail drops, nonexistent or just plain wrong. All of the names were checked against criminal and civil fingerprint databanks. But they had the current United Coast security rental picture and the picture used in the Maryland driver's license. It ultimately led to the true recent address on the Milford property.

Just two hours earlier, two FBI Agents in a landscaper's van arrived at Mrs. Milford's door, showing their FBI credentials, explaining that they needed Mr. Vryke's confidential help on an urgent security matter. Could she identify him and confirm if he is on the property? They showed her the rental security camera picture from United Coast.

"Yes, that's Eugene. He's home. His car's there and I saw him only a short time ago. Doing some yard work."

They surprised her by requesting she come with them right away, allowing her to bring her pills.

The FBI had used a Prince George's County maintenance crew truck to

search for a water power line problem in the lane leading to the guest house, keeping it under surveillance. The tag and vehicle owner registration was valid for Eugene Vryke.

"Movement in the house. Male fitting the suspect's description," surveillance had radioed to Sergersen's command post.

As night fell, the cottage spilled light into the thick forested edge of the property. Occasionally, the windows were darkened by the shadow of someone walking inside. The Hyattsville ten-member HEAT team set up an outer perimeter. No registered weapons. No complaint history on the address, Hyattsville police informed Sergersen, as his heavily armed team members moved swiftly and silently, forming the inner perimeter. Birds chirped night-song from treetops while FBI snipers whispered reports through their headsets.

Sergersen was preparing to "make the call" when an explosion of sound blew from the cottage. Every member on the operation flinched. Loud rock music shattered the serenity. Led Zeppelin. Sergersen caught his breath and checked with everyone, as the strains of "Rock and Roll" ripped into the night.

"When the song ends, I'll make the call," he alerted his team.

From the outer perimeter, the HEAT team wondered if the FBI was deploying the old loud-music strategy. The FBI's snipers lay in the darkness, the suspect flitting in and out of their crosshairs.

The song ended. Sergersen placed the call. It was picked up on ring two.

"Hello."

"Sir, this is Mike Sergersen, special agent with the FBI. We'd like to talk to you about an important matter. For your own safety would you exit through the front door with your hands outstretched and palms open please."

A long moment of silence passed.

"Are you drunk, mister?"

"We'll sound a siren now."

A police siren yelped.

"Man, I think you got the wrong place."

"Sir, please exit the building."

"No."

"Would you please step outside and we'll clear everything up."

"Screw you. I know my rights."

Sergersen whispered a command into his radio. Four tear gas canisters crashed through the windows.

"What the hell. Hey." The suspect was coughing. "All right. Man, don't shoot me."

The instant he emerged on the doorstep Sergersen used a bullhorn.

"Hands high above your head, palms open please."

An intense spotlight illuminated the doorway and a squinting white male, about five-nine, 170 pounds, early forties, white T-shirt, jeans. Clean-cut.

Three agents materialized, handcuffing him.

A lead agent on Vryke's file from Baltimore approached him, looking at clear photographs of Vryke on a clipboard, then at the suspect. "May I see your shoe size, please? The agent checked, shaking his head. *Size nine. His build is different. No way is this the suspect.* The FBI's SWAT team completed a quick sweep of the cottage. No other occupants. No weapons. A lot of computers.

"What's your name, sir?"

"Paul Francis. What's going on?"

Agents were checking his identification from his wallet, radioing requests of NCIC checks.

"Eugene Vryke rents this place."

"Yes. Where is Mr. Vryke?"

"What's this about? He in trouble?"

"Please answer the question, sir."

"Out of town on business."

"Where?"

"I dunno. I think I might want my lawyer."

"Why?"

"I'm getting a divorce and I'm already paying the bastard too much."

"What are you doing on this property, Mr. Francis?"

"I'm a guest. Eugene gave me his keys. He's letting me use his place and his car because my old lady kicked me out. I met him at a computer science show in Alexandria."

Inside the cottage, an agent studied mail spread over the kitchen table. Mostly statements from credit card companies. He unfolded the list of aliases. Nearly all were on the list. Except one new one. The name X'd out in pen, *return to sender* scrawled on it.

"Hey," he said to the Baltimore agent, "Better run this one: Neil Chattersly, CiceroComputrex."

Within fifteen minutes a call came back.

"Chartered a flight to Seattle. Checked into a hotel in San Francisco. Still there."

The Baltimore agent hit the speed-dial button on his cell phone for his office to alert San Francisco.

SIXTY-THREE

Olivia heard the hydraulic groan of the flaps adjusting the Chicago jet's final approach for San Francisco.

The short visit with her relatives in Oak Park had been wonderful. Her cousin, Heather, had visited from St. Louis with her adorable little boys. Seeing them ignited Olivia's maternal desires. She could not resist constantly cuddling her "sweet angel nephews." The family get-together had lifted her aunt's spirits, inspiring plans for a Thanksgiving reunion at Olivia's house.

Her eyes glistened.

Not long ago, she had been lost. Iris Wood's tragedy had forced her to examine her own life, to meet others on-line; good people who had encouraged her, like Mr. Caselli had, to jump into life. To risk her heart. She was indebted to them, for now she had Ben. She was so lucky. *It all goes to show you that you never know what fate has in store for you.*

The pilot dimmed the cabin lights, and the metropolitan Bay Area glittered below. Olivia hoped Ben had received her message that she was returning on an earlier flight. The airline had tracked her down, alerting her to it. Had she left a Chicago contact number? She wasn't sure. She shrugged it off as the landing gear doors grumbled open.

In San Francisco, Wyatt tried to reign in his rage over Sydowski's accusation and the way he shoved his information aside, refusing to even listen.

Wyatt's key stuck in his lock before it worked. He kicked the door closed behind him. The red message light on his answering machine was flashing. One new message.

"Hi Ben, it's Liv. I'm rushing to get on my plane at O'Hare. The airline has me returning on an earlier flight. Something about a computer thing with my fare, an early departure. I know you're busy at work so please don't worry about picking me up. I'll take a taxi. So, see ya when I get home."

Just as well, Wyatt thought, *I don't want to meet Olivia in this mood.* He grabbed a beer, flopped on his sofa to study his copy of the Las Vegas material Reed had given him.

Maybe he should use it to try tracking this guy? It was genuine data, judging from Sydowski's reaction. Reed's computer friend had only got so far, but he didn't have the arsenal Wyatt had. Nobody did. He glanced at the CDs and disks Gricks had given him. Wyatt knew that if he conducted an

unauthorized probe, it would be his job. He tried to make sense of what *he* knew. The suspect was Eugene Vryke from Maryland, but they had no real résumé on him. So far, the FBI's Internet people, who had taken over Iris Wood's system, hadn't produced any cyber-stuff on anybody. If they had, no one had told Wyatt.

They had focused on airport rentals from Maryland. Fort Meade was in Maryland, along with several high-level military installations, the area where Gricks said secret research was done on INFERNO.

Wyatt glanced at the Las Vegas pictures, Carla Purcell's cryptic e-mail, possibly a direct road into the suspect's domain. Wyatt had no authority to take it. It would be his job. So what? *You're already serving the time, might as well commit the crime.* He fired up his computer, inserted the last of the CD's Gricks had given him. There were five strategies remaining. The password prompt appeared and Wyatt typed *Sleepy, Grumpy, Doc, Dopey.*

His fingers trembled slightly as he began working on the person who had written to Carla Purcell:

Dear CP:
I just have to know, if you found the right man, could you forgive him the sins of his past life?
iamu

At that moment, in the San Francisco homicide detail, the call to California from the FBI's Baltimore field office on Eugene Vryke's alias, Neil Chattersly of CiceroComputrex, set off a turf war between the SFPD and the FBI. It burned with the same intensity as a Fourth of July sparkler before an agreement was reached.

Vryke was a federal suspect, the information was FBI information. The FBI would take the lead on taking him down.

Using the name Neil Chattersly, Vryke was registered as a guest at the new SlumberLand, one of the scores of large hotels located along El Camino Real in San Bruno, just south of San Francisco International. Security camera video footage from the midafternoon was compared with the United Coast rental picture to confirm it was Vryke. He had not checked out. Housekeeping quickly confirmed he was absent from the sixth-floor room but his belongings appeared in use. Toothbrush on the bathroom countertop. Computers on the desk. The maid recovered a bathroom glass that the Bureau printed in a mobile evidence van parked in a nearby hangar, which was being used as the San Francisco FBI SWAT team's command post.

They moved swiftly, establishing perimeters. The rooms next to Vryke's, above and below, were seized by the FBI. Agents dressed in SlumberLand staff clothes, or appearing as tourists, worked on the floor, stairways, elevators. Snipers took points in rooms and rooftops of hotels adjacent to the

SlumberLand. Jetliners roared overhead, strobe lights and turbines lighting up the night.

Less than a quarter mile from the SlumberLand, Sydowski and Turgeon joined the small law enforcement army listening and waiting at the FBI command post. The constant thunder of aircraft left the investigators alone with their thoughts. For Sydowski, one of the most chilling aspects emerging from Vryke's case was the rising number of victims they could now link to him. Since he and Toronto police had submitted their cases to the VICAP and ViCLAS systems, offering the most comprehensive evidentiary details on Vryke's crimes, program specialists were calling with more matches. The FBI was trying to arrange a multiagency emergency meeting in Quantico.

The black coffee in Turgeon's takeout cup rippled with little circles as she read the latest sheet. "Jesus, Walt."

The number of women now feared to have been murdered by Eugene Vryke in the U.S. and around the world now stood at twelve.

In his apartment at his keyboard, Wyatt lost track of time as he attempted to tiptoe his way into the suspect's system. Bleary-eyed and exhausted he had only three untried strategies remaining of the twenty Gricks had supplied. Nothing was working. Wyatt rubbed his face when his monitor clicked, the screen's contents vanished into a single pinpoint of light. His system went down.

"What the hell."

In a futile gesture Wyatt unplugged everything, replugged it, restarted, waiting for it all to come up. Instead, a galaxy of alien data blurred across his monitor in a blizzard of static.

Wyatt looked into his monitor and froze.

Olivia appeared on his screen, smiling, as if talking to the viewer.

"May I help you?"

"I understand you offer forgiveness here?"

A man's voice. Was he behind a camera? A hidden camera?

"Excuse me, I don't quite --"

"Cards. Forgiveness cards--"

The image vanished.

Olivia.

Wyatt swallowed, struggling to comprehend. *But the store's closed now. What the hell?* He knew Olivia's e-mail. Her username was livinsf. *It can't be Olivia.* With no time to consider ethics, Wyatt got into Olivia's Internet e-mail system easily. Her last exchange was with iamu. Who was that?

Is there anyone out there who can truly forgive the sins of a past life? iamu asked.

I am the one, she had responded.

Now I have the courage. I'll never be alone again. Thank you livinsf.

All the blood drained from Wyatt's face.

Oh, Jesus. He's here. He's stalking Olivia.

Wyatt dialed Olivia's home number. It rang unanswered. She wasn't yet back from Chicago. *Her message.* He replayed it. What airline? What time? He played the message.

"…something about a computer thing with my fare, an early departure…" Again. "…a computer thing..."

Computer.

What airline? Did he have time to search? Who would know her flight number? Her family in Chicago. Their names? He didn't know. Her aunt. *Think.* He had no clue. *Call the airline. Damn. Start with the big ones.* He'd be on hold forever. Wait. Her mother had died, just a few years ago. Wyatt called the San Francisco airport paging service to have Olivia Grant paged, then switched on his high-speed police laptop, logged onto the *Star* archives. Obits. Entered his credit card. Searched. *Grant* and *Olivia* and *daughter,* and what was her aunt's first name? *Maureen.* He submitted his search. *Come on. One match. There it is….daughter Olivia and sister Maureen Latzer, husband Randall Latzer, of Oak Park, Illinois.* Wyatt called directory, then placed the call on his cell phone, rushing to his car.

'Hello, you've reached…"

Damn. Taking a breath, he left a message and his cell phone number, then drove to Olivia's house, praying she was home.

He rang her doorbell. No answer.

Wyatt walked to the rear, startled by a cat chasing a squirrel near a rear basement window. A motion-detector light switched on, he saw a hairline fracture of glass. Crouching down, he used his penlight to inspect the window. He saw a shoe impression. Wyatt swallowed. He saw the carefully cut glass, saw the loosened bars, tapped at it and it fell in, smashing inside. He studied the impression. It matched Vryke's Colossal Sports Strider on the case board.

Jesus! He's here.

Wyatt called 911. Went to the rear door, broke the glass and entered with his gun drawn, searching every room and closet of the house, then waited at the front gate for the patrol unit, flashing his star, explaining. They searched again. He called Turgeon's cell phone.

"Linda, he's here. Vryke's in San Francisco."

"We know."

"You know?"

"Listen, Ben. It's okay. But I can't really talk now."

There was so much background noise. *Jets?*

"Just tell me if she's with you, Linda."

"Who?"

"Olivia. My -- Olivia Grant."

"I don't know what you're -- Listen, We've got a line on him. Everything's under control. Relax. I got to go."

Turgeon hung up.

Damn. He had to find Olivia.

"Could you guys hang out here? Half an hour or so? Have something to eat. Just to check on the welfare of the resident and call me." He left his card. "Please?"

The uniforms shrugged. They'd stay as long as they could. Wyatt's cell phone trilled as he headed to his car.

"Randall Latzer here."

"Thanks for calling, Mr. Latzer."

"You're the detective Olivia was going on about. She's sweet on you, sir."

"Randall, did she say what flight she was on? It was changed and I was supposed to pick her up."

"Yes, got it written down. Let's see…"

Wyatt's cell phone began beeping, his battery was dying. He had to get to the airport. He needed to be certain.

"Funniest thing. A man called here and said she had to be on an earlier flight. Here we go." Randall Latzer recited the airline flight number.

"Hope you're at the airport, Ben."

"Why?"

"Because her plane is due to arrive now."

Wyatt smashed his gas pedal to the floor. His mind racing through the fastest possible route to San Francisco International.

"A man called here and said she had to be on an earlier flight."

No. This can't be. A joke. Would the cops do this to him? Did they hate him that much to set him up? Push him over the edge? Weaving through expressway traffic, lights glaring, horns blaring, Wyatt grabbed his dying phone, punching the number for Turgeon's cell phone.

"Turgeon." He could barely hear her.

"It's Wyatt. Linda, he's at the airport. I think he's at the airport."

"Ben we know you can't ---" Then he heard Sydowski. "You are *off* this case, Wyatt! Stop calling!"

Landing gear locked, Olivia's jet whined to earth near the SlumberLand just as an FBI SWAT team member spotted movement in Vryke's hotel room.

The commander gave the green light for a hard entry, and four heavily armed members stormed the room. It was empty. The movement was a curtain billowed by the air conditioner's fan, throwing an eerie shadow.

One of the agents drew his team's attention to a wall covered by a large fabric mural the hotel had installed to muffle sound. Something was visible from under a corner. They lifted it, then yanked the mural down, jaws dropping.

God Almighty.

Photographs of women were pinned to the wall. Floor to ceiling. Color headshots.

Their eyes were lifeless. Those that still had eyes. Faces frozen with terror. Those that still had faces.

"Must be over a hundred."

On the desk sat two large laptop computers. One agent tapped his gloved finger on the space bar. Eugene Vryke appeared on the enlarged clear screen.

"I'd give anything to see your expression. But thank you," Vryke said. "It's begun now. There's no turning back. You, whoever you are, will have your place in history. Please be careful. Don't touch anything. The museums will want it. Take a look around. See them. My dark cathedral of liars, its ceiling is painted with the blood of others. It was painstaking work, as you will soon see. But my time has come. My search has ended. I've finally found her. The One. We're together now. Forever."

The agents were stunned until one managed to say into a radio: "You better get the investigators in here, now!"

Olivia was pleasantly surprised when she grabbed her suitcase at the luggage carousel. She heard her name being paged, then spotted a small sign: OLIVIA GRANT.

It was in the hands of a limo driver, wearing a black cap, dark glasses, white shirt, tie, dark jacket and pants.

"I'm Olivia Grant."

"I've been dispatched to take you some place special, ma'am."

The driver tipped his hat, took her bag.

Olivia blushed. "It was Ben. He sent you? She bit her bottom lip. "He is so sweet. Must be the page, so I wouldn't miss you."

The driver nodded. "Follow me, please."

He led Olivia from arrivals to the chaotic loading zone and a gleaming black car amid a long line of gleaming black cars. He opened the rear passenger door for Olivia, who in the noise and hubbub of the traffic did not hear Wyatt shouting her name some fifty yards away.

Wyatt saw Vryke close the driver's door, and he stopped running. He was too far off to make it on foot. He rushed back to his car, punching 911 into his phone, looking for a marked unit, security, anyone. His phone beeped; then his tires squealed.

The limousine reflected the night. Olivia heard the doors automatically lock as it glided from the airport. She found a bouquet of a dozen white

sweetheart roses for her in the back seat, then read the unsigned card:

Olivia, you've always been the one.

She blushed, remembering her lovemaking with Ben. This was so romantic. He was sweeping her off of her feet. She pushed the button lowering the glass partition.

"Excuse me, driver. Can you say where Ben said to take me?"

"It's a surprise, ma'am."

Soft classical music filled the car. Olivia sunk her head into the plush headrest, smiling.

Wyatt's knuckles whitened on the wheel. Horns blared as he battled not to lose the limo. It was fast. A hundred yards ahead of him, widening the distance. How he wished he had a department car, lights and screamers. Where were the other units? Turgeon said they had a line on him. He struggled with indecision. Should he risk stopping to make a call? He was too far behind to get a make on the car or its plate. His cell phone was dead. *Shut it off, you might be able to squeeze enough residual juice for one last ditch 911 call.* His tires screeched when a motorcycle veered into his lane just as the limo left the freeway.

Olivia was enthralled. It was a breathtaking ride cutting across the city, passing north through Golden Gate Park heading toward the Presidio, the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance nearly two miles ahead. *Maybe we'll cross it to one of those beautiful restaurants in Sausalito.* Her heart swelled. This was going to be a night she would always remember.

Wyatt's cell phone came to life beeping, warning his internal battery was low.

"Come on." He punched the numbers.

The call went through to the emergency dispatcher.

"Do you require police, fire or --"

His battery beeped.

Wyatt began shouting into his phone: "Police emergency -- *beep* -- this is Inspector Ben Wyatt SFPD in -- *beep* -- pursuit of a multiple homicide suspect -- *beep* -- with a hostage northbound -- *beep* -- approach to the *beep, beep* -- Golden Gate Bridge."

"Repeat. You're breaking up, sir --"

The limo passed the toll plaza, proceeding along the bridge, the lights of

San Francisco magnificent against the night. Olivia remembered the last time she was here and the reason. Blinking back her tears, smelling the roses, aching to see Ben, happy she had taken a chance, had risked her heart, for now she truly believed she had found the love she had longed for all of her life. She stroked the fine gold chain he'd given her.

"Mind if I ask you a personal question ma'am?" the driver said, as the car neared the first tower.

"Not at all."

"You believe in forgiveness, right?"

Olivia thought it was rather philosophical. She shrugged. "Yes I do."

"I mean you sell it at your shop."

"Yes, but how did you --"

His voice was familiar. The scars.

Her heart began beating faster.

The emergency lights of two bridge security vehicles, a California Highway Patrol cruiser and a Marin County car, were activated as police marshaled at the Golden Gate's north end to halt traffic.

"I'm not going to ask you if you are truly willing to forgive the sins of a past life, because you've already done it. We've shared so much and I can't afford to hear another lie. So many others have lied."

Olivia's skin prickled. "Who are you?"

"I am you and you are The One."

Vryke saw police lights at the bridge's north end. Calmly he touched his stun gun and medical case containing his hypodermic. He checked his rear-view mirrors, touched his brakes, tires screaming, rubber burning, the big car sailing, horns protesting, Olivia's nails digging into the armrest as he swung it 180 degrees, reversing their direction on the bridge, the engine roaring, the limo now charging south, back to San Francisco. Police sirens wailing behind him.

Wyatt's car had sped by the South Tower to the center-point when he witnessed the limo's turnaround. He swallowed hard, double-checking his seatbelt, tightening his grip. No time to think, he swerved his car to block the limo, rubber liquefying, metal crunching, as the bigger car clipped Wyatt's front quarter, airbags deploying, exploding debris, glass, puncturing its tires, engine fluids spraying, hissing, traffic squealing, horns, brakes, chaos, the limo and Wyatt's car coming to a stop some thirty yards apart, yelping sirens approaching.

Vryke seized Olivia's wrist. She struggled, still gripping her roses as he dragged her toward the San Francisco side of the bridge.

"Please no. Help! Please."

Wyatt running. His gun drawn.

"San Francisco Police. Release her!"

"Back off." Vryke's powerful arm locked around Olivia's neck, pulling her close like a shield, forcing her toward the east side of the bridge. Traffic screeching, horns blasting. Wyatt saw the metal flash of a hypodermic needle in Vryke's hand.

"You're going with me into eternity." Vryke said into Olivia's ear. Olivia, pleading, sobbing, struggling, gripping the cold railing. The city lights, the bay winds, the stars.

"God, please. No."

"Release her now."

Vryke gripped the needle, raising his arm, shouting to the heavens as Olivia fought with all of her strength. Her eyes found Wyatt's *Ben, oh, God, Ben, save me!* Olivia twisting, Wyatt feeling the trigger, swallowing, squeezing. Vryke jerking her back, the bullet passing through Olivia, boring through Vryke's heart, Olivia collapsing, Wyatt firing a second, third time at Vryke's upper chest dropping him. There was the strong burning smell from the gun and blood everywhere. Instinctively he rolled Vryke and cuffed him.

"Olivia."

Wyatt sat on the road cradling her limp body. Pressing his hand over her wound, not hearing the police radios crackling, the sirens, ambulances approaching, or seeing the people rushing to them.

"Olivia."

He was numb to the TV news choppers, the reporters, photographers and gathering crowd.

"Olivia."

Amid the white roses, Wyatt pulled her to him, the only one who had believed him, loved him, her blood everywhere, her face, her necklace, his face, and his hands as he rocked her in his arms.

SIXTY-FOUR

In the hospital, Olivia's eyes fluttered open. She had drifted in and out of consciousness over the past few days. Wyatt had remained by her side.

"Ben?"

"It's all right."

"What happened?"

"It's all over and you're safe."

"My shoulder hurts."

"My bullet passed through you. The doctor says you're going to be sore for a long time, but you'll be all right."

Olivia took in the room, searching for answers.

"I remember the bridge. A man." She put her hand on her face. "He was a person from on-line, he came to my shop, the airport, the bridge. Ben, he--"

"He won't hurt you anymore. He's dead."

"You were there. You saved my life. Ben, he said he was going to --" She began sobbing.

"It's all right." Wyatt comforted her. "It's all right. We got him."

The *San Francisco Star* was folded in the cushion of the chair next to Olivia.

Dominating its front page was a colossal color photo taken by a vacationing Japanese news photographer. It showed Wyatt's anguished, bloodied face as he sat on the road of the Golden Gate Bridge cradling Olivia, while Vryke lay face-down, dead in a pool of his own blood behind them.

The picture ran under the headline: GLOBAL SERIAL KILLER SHOT WITH VICTIM IN BRIDGE HORROR.

The Associated Press had moved it around the world.

The story of Eugene Vryke commanded the *Star's* front and six clear inside pages. The paper put its entire news department on it. Reed was the lead writer.

The *Star* had the most compelling information on Vryke; the troubled son of a NASA scientist had become one of history's most prolific serial killers in his attempt to bring the world to its knees. Had he not been detected, Vryke would've succeeded in paralyzing economies and infrastructures on the planet through a sophisticated computer attack he had spent years devising. A plan he called Revelation 23, a name suggesting a foretelling beyond Revelation 22, the final chapter of the Bible.

Vryke had conceived it years ago by scouring Maryland dumps for discarded computers, software, and programs from research and development aspects and prototypes of INFERNO and other ultra-secret government

computer defense systems around Fort Meade. Through his computer shop grapevine, Vryke had discovered that the federal agency whose duty it was to destroy sensitive, discarded material had sidestepped the process. That scandal would ignite a furor within the Beltway, leading to an FBI investigation and congressional hearings.

Vryke's Revelation 23 had paralleled, and in most instances exceeded, the ingenuity of some of the U.S. government's most costly and vital computer defense systems. His strategy had involved a highly complex, labyrinthine series of worms and programs with an array of timers. The first would be activated within forty-eight hours of his death.

But using Wyatt's work, an emergency team of top national security experts from some twenty agencies, including those at the Livermore Lab and industry, toiled around the clock disarming R-23, as it came to be known. It was an event that would be spoken of for years. Had they failed, R-23 would have perverted the principles of INFERNO by infiltrating and disabling every on-line and networked system in the world, from telephones, to TV broadcasting, to power grids, to nuclear and satellite systems: the Y2K nightmare realized a hundredfold. Computer users would have experienced their systems freezing; every e-mail, every broadcast would have been hijacked by the recorded murders of Vryke's victims played in a nonstop loop on monitors and TV screens in every corner of the planet.

In the wake of worldwide news reports of the disarming of R-23, Vryke's computer profile became well known, enabling police agencies to quickly compare it to unsolved ritualistic murders of women who were now known to have communicated with him on-line.

Vryke's confirmed toll: seventy-five victims. He had recorded each one. Olivia Grant was to be seventy-six, until an outcast San Francisco detective, gripped by self-doubt, tracked him down and killed him, the *Star* reported.

A nurse entered the room indicating it was time for more medication and rest for Olivia.

Wyatt kissed Olivia, then left for the lounge at the end of the hallway.

He saw Sydowski there, hands in his pockets, staring at the city.

"How is she?" Sydowski did not turn from the window.

Wyatt let a long moment pass. "She's going to need a long time. But she'll be okay."

"I believed I was on the right track, getting close, doing things my way."

"You were."

A family entered, a man, his wife, their teenaged daughter. The man read the tension in the room. The family retreated.

"Look, Sydowski. Why did you come?"

"You know what Vryke was looking for from the women?"

"Forgiveness."

"That makes two of us."

Wyatt didn't expect this. He said nothing.

"It was me, Ben. I'd lost touch with Reggie, then seeing him poking through garbage. It was me. I never checked on him. Never looked in on him. If anyone failed as back up, it was me. A good friend pointed this out to me and it took a while to realize she was right. It was easier for me to put it on you than to accept that I had abandoned him. You were in that crack house with him. I wasn't there. Hell, I didn't know you." Sydowski let a few moments pass. "But I think I know you now." Sydowski turned to him.

Wyatt said nothing.

Sydowski turned back to the window. "When I saw Reggie picking through trash he begged me not to tell anyone. I went to see him the other day to tell him he might have a civil case for his disability. That's when he told me something I never knew. That he had a drinking problem. That he'd been drinking on the job and you knew. That you were covering for him, trying to get him into the program."

Wyatt was looking at a landscape of a mountain range on the far wall.

"He told me it started in Homicide," Sydowski said. "It was getting bad so he requested to get detailed to narcotics. Never told anyone. Not even me, his partner. Thought I'd see him as weak."

Sydowski shook his head, rubbing his hands over his face.

"He told me he saw nothing the day he got shot. Couldn't see a damn thing from his angle, but that he'd heard a kid. He wasn't sure if he'd been drinking that morning. He panicked when the doctors first said he might never walk again. Got scared about his pension, the job, Fran, the kids. So he blamed you. Yet you never gave him up. You never said a word about Reggie's drinking. You backed him up, and still do," Sydowski turned. "Jesus, Ben. I was wrong. So goddamned wrong. I apologize."

Wyatt said nothing. There was so much he wanted to say, wanted to vomit right back at him. Let him know the price he had paid. But he was overcome. With exhaustion, posttraumatic stress. Enduring what he and Olivia had endured. Life was too short for vendettas. He looked away.

"Olivia's going to need time," Wyatt said. "So will I."

Sydowski had no rights here. No say in the matter.

"Sure, Ben. I understand." Sydowski patted his shoulder and left.

Reed was the only reporter with access to Wyatt, who gave him the full account of Olivia being his girlfriend; how Vryke had locked onto her and how he had locked onto Vryke. At one stage, Wyatt told him he couldn't have tracked Vryke without Reed's information.

"Like you said, Tom, it was the key."

In the weeks after Vryke's story broke, the *Star* suspended Brader for harassing Molly Wilson.

Around that time, the *Star* revoked Reed's suspension, giving him, instead, a three-week paid vacation. He used it to stay home and reconnect with his family. He also picked up on his crime novel. Reed and Ann went out to dinners and movies. He dropped by her stores. They began talking about a second honeymoon and future plans when he got a job offer from the *New York Times.* The job was in New York. National crime features.

"Take your time to think it over, Tom," the editor said.

Reed was doing just that when a few days later, Violet Stewart, a senior editor at the *Star* caught wind of the *Times* pitch and called Reed with a heartfelt and fair proposal. She would give Reed an additional three weeks of paid vacation to think it all over. The *Star* was then willing to negotiate with him against whatever the *Times,* or any other news organization, offered him.

"We'd like to keep you, Tom."

When Reed first met Ann in college she told him how she had dreamed of owning a children's clothing store in Manhattan. Maybe this was an opportunity for both of them. He turned to her for advice.

"What do you think of these offers?"

"What about my offer, Tom? Nobody can match it," she said as they buckled their seatbelts in the first class section of a 747 bound for Hawaii.

"Stay home and write novels?"

"Yes. The stores are doing just fine."

Reed looked at Zach, playing with his newest computer game. He was doing much better since they had gotten rid of the mice and switched his office and Zach's bedroom.

"I don't know, Ann. What do you think about expanding your empire to New York?"

"Are you serious? I *love* New York. You're seriously considering the *Times?"*

"I think *we* should seriously consider everything."

"Glad you see it that way."

"But we've got lots of time to think," Reed said as the jet lifted off, pushing them into their seats. "For now, let's have fun."

A few days after Vryke's death, a lawyer arrived at the San Francisco medical examiner's office in the Hall of Justice. She was there to claim Vryke's body and ensure interment in Florida. A plot had been purchased in a small cemetery in Brevard County not far from Cape Canaveral, the Kennedy Space Center, and the beaches where he had played as a boy.

The modest granite headstone would have Vryke's name, date of birth, and death, over a few lines of inscription:

Revelation 24

It was Vryke's monumental cyber-attack program that would eclipse

R-23, for it was designed to adapt to technology under development. Not a soul knew of it, for it was lying dormant, its timer set for July 20, 2004, the thirty-fifth anniversary of the lunar landing, the day Vryke would be resurrected to give meaning to the final words on his headstone:

AND THE WORLD SHALL KNOW HIS NAME.

If you enjoyed *BLOOD OF OTHERS* # 3 – be sure to look for *NO WAY BACK* # 4.

Scroll down for a special preview of the next installments in the 5-book Tom Reed – Walt Sydowski series.

NO WAY BACK – BOOK # 4

CHAPTER ONE

The register at the San Francisco Deluxe Jewelry Store whirred as sales clerk Vanessa Jordan slid the credit card receipt to the woman admiring the custom order she had bought.

"Your husband is going to adore it," Vanessa said.

"I hope so." Her eyes glistened. "I wanted something special for our anniversary."

Vanessa thought her customer was beautiful. She was wearing a tailored mauve suit, had lovely brown hair, pearl studs, a matching two-row necklace.

"Trust me, he's going to love this. I'd be happy to gift wrap it for you."

Studying the exquisite craftsmanship, the woman considered the offer when the store's front door chime sounded, diverting Vanessa's attention to the security monitor under the counter. The video screen showed two people waiting at the entrance. A big woman in a long beige coat standing behind a man in a wheelchair. Access through the front door required staff to activate a remote lock. The store's guard had just left for his usual fifteen-minute break to get a bagel at the corner bakery. Vanessa followed the security procedure, scanned the other monitors, and inventoried the store: She had her customer at the cash register. Across the floor, a man in his sixties was alone, looking at watches. There was a couple in their late twenties near the engagement diamonds, cooing at rings. Through the window to the street she saw nothing unusual. Everything was fine.

Vanessa glanced over her shoulder down the hall at the manager, a kind soft-spoken man who wore frameless glasses. He was working in the back office, which had the same closed-circuit monitors and a speaker for the front chime. Upon hearing it, he left his desk to help, nodding an okay for Vanessa to open the door. She pressed the button under the counter. The woman and the man in the wheelchair entered.

At that moment, the customer at the counter had reached a decision. "Yes, I would like it gift wrapped. Will it take long?"

Vanessa didn't answer.

"Excuse me, miss? I'd like it gift wrapped."

Vanessa was staring at the front door. The manager had arrived behind her, adjusting his jacket, stopping dead in his tracks.

Once inside the store, the old man leaped from the wheelchair. The woman pushing him folded it, wedging it so the automatic door could not lock behind them. She was over six feet tall, wearing a kerchief over her thick blond hair. She had large dark glasses. Her face was smeared with layers of freakish white makeup that no longer disguised the Adam's apple of a man as his long coat snapped open and he produced an automatic assault rifle.

"This is a holdup! Everyone on the floor!"

Someone screamed. The gun came alive, exploding with rapid fire, destroying every security camera including those hidden in the store's custom-made grandfather clock and the overhead light fixtures. The clinking of debris and spent shells filled the air. The wheelchair man stepped forward, silver talons of hair reached from his fedora, huge dark glasses hid much of his face, which resembled fiery red plaster. He opened his coat to a Kevlar vest with a hand grenade clipped to each side of his chest.

"Don't touch any alarms," he said to the manager, who ceased inching toward the counter.

The shooter replaced his empty magazine, let go a staccato burst above the manager's head. Rounds ripped into the wall, smashing an array of expensive Swiss and Austrian clocks. Then he directed gunfire at every display case glass rained everywhere. The engaged woman screamed, her boyfriend shielded her with his body under a table. The old watch shopper lay face down on the carpet, his hands trembling above his white hair. The red-faced man came around the counter, pressed the muzzle of a handgun to Vanessa's head while shoving a canvas bag in her face.

"Fill this with everything from the displays now," he said, then turned his gun on the manager, thrusting a bag at him. "I know your vault's open. I know what you have. And I want all your videotapes. Let's go!" They disappeared into the back.

In front, Vanessa hurried from display to display, her fingers bleeding as she swept rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, watches, into the bag.

In seconds the manager returned, hands above his head. The wheelchair man was behind him, pressing his gun to the manager's neck, clutching the canvas bag laden from the vault's contents and security tapes. One of the grenades was missing from his vest.

"Please don't hurt anyone," the manager said. "You have what you want. Just go." The gun's grip thudded into his lower neck, dropping him to the floor. Vanessa cried out as everyone's attention was jerked to the front.

Outside, a loudspeaker sounded the word "Police."

The red-faced man hurried from the manager to the side of the entrance window, cursing at what he saw down the street.

"What is it?" said the shooter, darting to the window, eyeballing the problem. "Damn it!" He tightened his grip on his automatic rifle, scanned the customers and staff, assessing their situation. "What the hell are we going to do? How do we get out of this?"

The red-faced man went to Vanessa, seizing the bag from her. "You're done. Get on the floor."

He then squatted to appraise the female customer near the counter. In her thirties, well-dressed, nice figure, brown hair. Flawless skin that smelled real good as he leaned into her face to push his gun against her head.

"Did you drive here, lady?"

She nodded.

"Alone?"

She nodded.

"Is your car near?"

She hesitated, blinking at the black lenses that hid his eyes. The muzzle drilled hard into her skull.

"Please don't hurt me."

"Do you want to live?"

"Yes."

"Is your car near?"

"Yes."

The woman felt herself being hoisted to her feet, felt the gun jabbing into her back, rushing her to the door where the man opened the wheelchair, then forced her into it as she pleaded in vain. At gunpoint, he ordered her to produce her keys from her purse, then her driver's license, registration, and insurance information identifying her car, the make, model, year, color, plate number. He snatched her wallet, surprised as he fanned her cash. He flipped through personal items, credit cards, bank cards, pausing at the color snapshot of a boy. He looked ten or twelve, brown hair like hers.

"This your kid?"

Tears came. She squeezed her eyes shut, nodding.

"Where's your car parked?"

"Please."

"Where?" He thrust his gun against her neck.

"To the left at the end of the block. This side of the street."

He drew his face within inches of hers. She stared into his dark glasses, seeing nothing in the blackness but the reflection of her fear.

"Make a sound and I'll go to your home and kill your kid. Understand?"

He threw a blanket across her lap, the bags under the seat, then handcuffed her wrists to the armrests.

As she felt the metal clamping hard against her skin, her mind reeled. Did she kiss her son this morning? Her husband? Tell them how much she loved them? She saw their faces. Heard their voices. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She couldn't move her hands to brush them. This isn't happening. It's not real, I'm dreaming. Wake me. God, please wake me now.

The shooter's head shook, his blond curls jiggling. "This is all messed up, man. Don't be a fool. We're not taking her."

The handgun flew into his face, scraping his makeup-caked chin. "You're with me. Or you're dead. Right here. Right now. That clear?"

"Okay, okay, it's cool. It's your party."

The red-faced man whirled, plucking the remaining grenade from his vest, holding it up. "Just like the one I left at the back." He affixed a magnet and trip-wire mechanism to it at the front door's inside handle. "The trip retractor sets automatically when I close this door. Open it from either side, it

detonates, killing anyone within twenty-five feet."

They left.

The heist took minutes. The victims remained inside the jewelry store. Glass tinkled in the aftermath. Vanessa wept softly. The old watch shopper's hands were still trembling above his white hair. The manager's mind blurred with worry for his customers. Grenades on the doors. Lord, help us. They took that lady. She was just buying her husband a special anniversary gift; now she is a hostage. Oh, God, please help her. Struggling to make sense of it all, the manager heard the engaged woman murmuring to her fiancé under the ruins of a display case, her words growing audible.

"Our Father, who art in heaven—"

They all flinched at the sudden pop of gunfire coming from the street.

Click here to purchase *NO WAY BACK* – Book # 4.

Scroll down for sample of *BE MINE* – Book # 5.

BE MINE – BOOK # 5

CHAPTER ONE

Waiting alone at Jake's Bar & Grill in North Beach, Molly Wilson finished her second diet cola, then pressed redial on her cell phone. Four rings. She got his machine again. Damn.

"It's me. I'm at Jake's. Where are you? Call me." Nearly an hour late and not a word. This was not like Cliff. Maybe he'd left her a message at work. She tried her line there.

"You've reached Molly Wilson of the *San Francisco Star*. I'm either on the phone or--"

She keyed in her password. No new messages since she'd left the newsroom. Just two hang-up calls. She'd been getting a lot of those lately but nothing from Cliff. She ordered another soda and brooded.

In the time they'd been together Cliff had never been late. Except tonight. Maybe he'd sensed that she'd reached a decision. Cliff was a great guy. She'd never set out to hurt him. She'd set out to have fun and they were having fun. But she didn't want to move in with him. Wasn't ready for it. She wanted to cool things. See other people. She was going to tell him tonight. She was going to thank him for his offer and return his key.

If only she could reach him, she thought on an exhale.

She didn't like this. She tried his cell phone, wanting this night to be over so she could retreat to her apartment, soak in her tub, listen to some Phil Collins, then eat a gallon of butterscotch ripple. No answer. She drummed her glossed nails on the table. Then stopped.

Someone was watching her.

Click here to purchase *BE MINE* – Book # 5.

IF ANGELS FALL – BOOK # 1

CHAPTER ONE

Danny saw the girl again.

As the subway train eased out of the Coliseum station, he looked up, captivated by her frozen smile, her vacant stare, and the fact that she never spoke.

Never.

She was dead.

Her throat had been cut and her body stuffed into a plastic garbage bag hidden in Golden Gate Park.

She was two years old and her name was Tanita Marie Donner. Two eleven-year-old girls from Lincoln Junior High found her during a science class field trip.

"She looked like a little naked doll," Natalie Jackson, one of the girls, told a San Francisco TV station.

That was a year ago. The nightmares were now less frequent for the schoolgirls. For most San Franciscans, Tanita's murder was fading from memory, although her face still stared from bus shelters, store windows, and bumper stickers, an image as familiar to the Bay Area as the Golden Gate or the Transamerica Pyramid. For a time, it embodied San Francisco's anguish. A blurred, grainy blow-up of a color snapshot, Tanita timidly showing her tiny milk-white teeth as Mommy coaxed a smile. Two pink butterfly barrettes held back her brown hair. She was wearing a cotton dress with lace trim, and crushing her white teddy bear to her chest. Her dark eyes shining like falling stars.

REWARD screamed in bold, black letters above her head. Below were details of when and where Tanita was last seen alive. Twenty-five thousand dollars was offered for information leading to an arrest in her murder. No takers.

Tanita Marie Donner's killer was still out there.

Click here to purchase *IF ANGELS FALL* – Book # 1.

COLD FEAR – BOOK # 2

CHAPTER ONE

The last thing Paige Baker saw before fleeing her family's campsite was the blood dripping from her father's ax.

Her parents had just had an argument, ending with her mom stomping off and Paige scrambling with her dog for the shelter of her tent while her father savagely chopped wood.

Inside the tent, Paige wept at the *thud-thud-thud* of his wrath, logs cleaving, splintering. She tried to calm herself, think of ways to make it better for her parents. But what was a ten-year-old kid supposed to do?

Find her mom, talk to her? Paige began jamming things in her backpack. Her family was falling apart. She was helpless. Maybe she should try talking to her dad.

Somehow she summoned the courage to approach her father, emerging from her tent, inching toward him with Kobee, her beagle, in her arms.

"Daddy?"

No answer. His muscles contracted as he chopped. Sweat dropped from his face, darkly blotching the neck and underarms of his gray U.S. Marines T-shirt.

Thud-thud-thud.

"Daddy. Please. I need to talk to you."

"Get the hell away from me and go find your damned mother!"

His fury terrified her. Kobee yelped. She hugged him tighter, standing before her father.

"Please…I need to talk…."

He steadied a log upright with his left hand, swinging the ax with his right hand.

"Daddy!"

Her pleading distracting him, the ax slipped, the blade struck his hand, blood spurted. He cursed, then without warning charged at her still gripping the ax, blood webbing down the handle.

"I told you to get the hell out of my face now, goddamn it! Go see your mother!"

Paige squealed, bolting with Kobee on his leash, items spilling from her backpack as she ran down the dark wooded trail, her heart breaking. She had never ever seen her dad like this before.

Click here to purchase *COLD FEAR* – Book # 2.

AUTHOR'S NOTE and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And to you, the reader. Thanks for your time. Hope you enjoyed the ride.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Mofina is a former crime reporter and the award-winning author of several acclaimed thrillers. He's interviewed murderers face-to-face on death row; patrolled with the LAPD and the RCMP. His true crime articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Marie Claire*, *Reader's Digest* and *Penthouse*. He's reported from the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, Qatar and Kuwait's border with Iraq.

New York Times Bestselling author, Tess Gerritsen, says: "Rick Mofina's tense taut writing makes every thriller he writes an adrenaline-packed ride." His short stories have been selected for anthologies by Michael Connelly, Peter Robinson, Ed Gorman, the Mystery Writers of America and the United Kingdom's, Crime Writers Association.

The *International Thriller Writers*, *The Private Eye Writers of America* and *The Crime Writers of Canada* have listed Rick Mofina's titles as being among the best in the world.

His books have been published in 21 countries and have been praised by James Patterson, Dean Koontz, Michael Connelly, Lee Child, Tess Gerritsen, Jeffery Deaver, Sandra Brown, James Rollins, Brad Thor, Nick Stone, David Morrell, Allison Brennan, Heather Graham, Linwood Barclay, Peter Robinson, Håkan Nesser and Kay Hooper.



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